ARABIC DIGLOSSIA: TEACHING ONLY THE STANDARD VARIETY IS A DISSERVICE TO STUDENTS

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Results from a recent survey show that students learning Arabic in the United States want to learn spoken varieties, despite a lack of support from their teachers. Spoken Arabic is often stigmatized as a less prestigious variety of Arabic, even though it is the language of choice for day-to-day communication for native Arabic speakers. Knowledge of a spoken variety of Arabic is essential for students who hope to integrate into the general populace in the Arabic-speaking world. This paper argues that Arabic programs throughout the United States should integrate the teaching of Spoken Arabic into their curricula to accommodate student wants and needs.

INTRODUCTION

A recent survey from the National Middle East Language Resource Center (NMELRC) of over 650 students learning Arabic at 37 U.S. institutions of higher education provides great insight into student desire to learn Spoken Arabic. Even so, the teaching of Spoken Arabic still remains the exception rather than the rule in institutions of higher education. Most students learn only the formal variety of Arabic, which "creates a fake model of oral proficiency by presenting the students with an artificial variety that is not used by the native speakers since no one uses [formal Arabic] for daily-life situations" (Al-Batal, 1995, p. 123). The teaching of this "artificial variety" does a disservice to students who want to learn to communicate with Arabic speakers in the language they really use.

The Modern Language Association (MLA) recently reported that from 1998 to 2002 there was a 92% increase in the number of Arabic programs throughout the United States (Welles, 2004). Due to the incessant media coverage of upheaval in the Arabic-speaking world, combined with the highly publicized intelligence fallout and other events related to 9/11, the next MLA report will most assuredly reveal an even greater subsequent increase in the number of Arabic programs and students interested in learning Arabic. These programs must be prepared to train future professionals to communicate effectively with the Arabic-speaking world. Commenting on the need for such Arabic programs to help students communicate successfully, Younes (1995) wrote "If the goal of an Arabic-as-a-foreign-language program is to prepare students to function successfully in Arabic, then they should be introduced to both a Spoken Arabic dialect and [formal Arabic] from the beginning of an Arabic course" (p. 233). Such an approach is, regrettably, not standard practice in the field.

This paper claims that early exposure to spoken varieties of Arabic should become the norm in Arabic learning programs in the United States.

Research supports that this is what students want. Selected data from the NMELRC student survey combined with a similar survey administered to 82 teachers of Arabic at over 30 institutions of higher education are presented in this paper.

Language Prestige

One of the main reasons that Spoken Arabic is not taught and researched on a larger scale in the United States likely has to do with language prestige. Spoken varieties of Arabic, sometimes referred to as dialects, embody the language one uses on a daily basis in and out of the home. Unfortunately, they are also the varieties of language that are sometimes considered to be unworthy of linguistic attention or research. This contributes to the feeling that the spoken varieties of Arabic should not be taught in schools, in or outside the Arabic-speaking world. Describing the situation in Israel, Schmidt, Ibar & Shohamy (2004) wrote, "one frequently hears from teachers and pupils that [formal Arabic] is not a useful language for personal communication given that it is the spoken [variety], though less prestigious, which de facto is used in everyday life for colloquial purposes and for personal interactions. Teachers, therefore, feel that the lack of ability to speak is a major obstacle and a demotivating factor in the language learning process and may result in the discontinuation of studies" (p. 220). The perception of lower prestige does not exclude Spoken Arabic from being the language that is actually used on a daily basis in most every context a normal person would encounter. It is interesting to note that these teachers and pupils in the above-mentioned quote recognize the limitations of formal Arabic, though the spoken variety still remains stigmatized. The paradox is that the students perceive the spoken variety to be less prestigious yet they feel a lack of motivation because the formal variety is inadequate for communication.

Versteegh (2004) wrote "it remains difficult in the Arab world to arouse interest in the dialects as a serious object of study. Many speakers of Arabic still feel that the dialect is a variety of language without a grammar…and even in the universities there is a certain reluctance to accept dialect studies as a dissertation subject" (p. 132). This lack of interest in Arabic dialects and reluctance to consider Spoken Arabic worthy of study makes it difficult for foreigners to integrate linguistically and culturally into Arab society. Versteegh (2004) continues in this vein: "The colloquial language as the language of family and home is associated with the in-group, with intimacy and friendship, whereas the high variety is associated with social distance and official relationships. The use of [formal Arabic] may thus be a sign of respect, but also of creating a distance between speakers" (p. 195). Students who have only studied this "high variety", or formal Arabic, are kept outside the in-groups and often experience frustration and embarrassment when trying to communicate with Arabic speakers. The very culture and language the students are trying to study is somewhat off-limits to those who do not speak the appropriate code or register. It is also not uncommon for native Arabs to snicker at foreigners who only speak the formal language, thus potentially causing a sense of humiliation. What, therefore, makes the difference

between the spoken and formal varieties of Arabic so distinct that foreigners may encounter such linguistic embarrassment?

Spoken & Formal Arabic

Formal Arabic, sometimes called "Written Arabic," is commonly known as Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), which is related to the older Classical Arabic (CA). This latter variety of Arabic is said to be based closely upon the language found in the Muslim holy book, the Qur'an. Both of these varieties of Arabic are often revered and considered sacred. The variety known as MSA is, for the most part, mutually intelligible across the Arab world from Iraq to Morocco and is used primarily by the media and at official occasions. It should be noted that MSA can be produced orally, though it is a highly specialized skill and used almost exclusively in formal contexts. Interestingly, Arab children do not usually study MSA until they enter elementary school and it is therefore approached much like a foreign language.

Spoken Arabic is often referred to as colloquial Arabic, dialects, or vernaculars. In this paper, Spoken Arabic refers to the varieties of language Arabs use for daily communication and not in formal contexts. The spoken varieties remain mostly unwritten, though some are now being codified. Each regional variety of Spoken Arabic represents a unique culture and people. It is this culture and its people that distinguish Spoken Arabic from the uniform MSA. It should also be noted that the spoken varieties of Arabic differ more and more significantly from each other the further away one goes from one's place of origin. Thus, Iraqi and Moroccan Arabic are almost entirely mutually unintelligible. Watson (2002) writes "Dialects of Arabic form a roughly continuous spectrum of variation, with the dialects spoken in the eastern and western extremes of the Arab-speaking world being mutually unintelligible" (p. 8). The following table (Table 1.1) provides a simple, yet interesting, example of how spoken varieties of Arabic differ in intelligibility. The English sentence "I want to go now" is given in the Iraqi, Syrian, Jordanian, Egyptian, and Moroccan dialects and MSA. The (q) represents a glottal stop and the capital "H" is pharyngeal. Note that the word order corresponds with the English, though the first person singular pronoun is optional and not represented in this table. Thus, each row contains the phrase "want (to) go now." The transliteration is read from left to right although Arabic is written from right to left in the script.

Table 1. <u>"I Want To Go Now"</u>

Areed aruuH haessa	Iraqi
Biddi ruuH haellae(q)	Syrian
Biddi aruuH haellae(q)	Jordanian
Aawiz aruuH dilwa'ti	Egyptian
Bgheet nimshi daaba	Moroccan
Ureedu an ath-haba alaan	MSA

Table 1.1 shows that there are some similarities between the spoken varieties of Arabic, though intelligibility lessens the farther one goes from any given point of origin. The particularities of spoken varieties of Arabic do not fall within the scope of this paper. This table is merely provided to demonstrate the issue of mutual unintelligibility in spoken varieties of Arabic.

There is a common misconception in the Arab world that the spoken varieties of Arabic are corruptions of MSA or CA as found in the Quran and are, therefore, somehow less prestigious varieties of Arabic. This claim, however, is not possible, since "writing systems are always based upon systems of oral language which of necessity develop first" (Daniels, 1998, p. 34). The near-deification of formal Arabic is not the topic of this paper, though it also contributes to the lowered status of Spoken Arabic varieties. Perhaps more unfortunate than misconceptions regarding the nature of spoken versus written language is the frustrating status of how Arabic is taught and learned in institutions of higher education. Ryding (1995) wrote "while the educational establishment has for decades enforced the concept of MSA first and foremost, this is completely the reverse of the native speaker's experience with Arabic as a mother tongue" (p. 226). Arabic is commonly taught and learned in the United States in the exact opposite manner of how native speakers acquire Arabic. Fortunately, there is some hope for the case of teaching Spoken Arabic.

The Case for Teaching Spoken Arabic

Over the past few decades sundry voices have called for change in Arabic program curricula to include the teaching of Spoken Arabic (Rammuny, 1978). This is welcome news, considering what the past few centuries have offered. "Arabic teaching in the U.S. began in philologically-oriented departments that offered Classical Arabic grammar and text-reading. With the updating of methodologies and a growth in interest in the modern Middle East, textbooks focused on what linguists termed 'Modern Standard Arabic.' Spoken Arabic was taught separately, typically in transliteration" (Al-Batal & Belnap, 2006, p. 396). If Spoken Arabic was taught, it was done so separately. The situation remains the same in most U.S. institutions of higher education today. If Spoken Arabic is taught, it is done so in a separate class. There are a few universities that have adopted an integrated approach in Arabic teaching in which MSA and Spoken Arabic are taught concurrently. These few programs however, are the striking exception rather than the norm. The current facts on the ground do not gel with the statement that "the Arabic classroom can and should be a place in which multiple registers co-exist, as they do in real life" (Al-Batal & Belnap, 2006, p. 397).

This coexistence of multiple registers and varieties of Arabic in "real life" is the reason that Arabic ought to be taught as more than a pair of compartmentalized entities. From internet chat rooms and radio and television programs, to the variety of choice for day-to-day language use, Spoken Arabic is deeply a part of Arab everyday life. At the same time, MSA is found in the daily newspapers and news broadcasts that thrive in Arab homes and workplaces. Moreover, the coexistence and acquisition of formal and Spoken Arabic is

essential for students hoping to score highly on proficiency exams. "It is obviously desirable for those who aspire to replicate the native-speaker proficiency in Arabic to become competent in *both* MSA *and* at least one colloquial dialect" (ACTFL, 1989, p. 374). Students must be exposed to MSA as well as Spoken Arabic to reach native or near-native proficiency. It should be noted that this statement is often the boiling point for heated debate among Arabic teaching professionals. Even if the arguments regarding student need and the appropriate timing of exposure to Spoken Arabic are set aside, academics argue most passionately concerning which variety of Spoken Arabic might be taught. It has come to the point where professors of Arabic have begun to hope to simply leave the topic closed at certain academic conferences (Alosh, 2005). There are various arguments in favor of and against the teaching of certain spoken varieties. "Arguments against teaching Spoken Arabic include the impossibility of dealing with the full range of Arabic dialects and the difficulty of choosing one dialect to teach. This argument is specious … [R]ecent NMELRC surveys indicate that 86% of students who expressed interest in learning Spoken Arabic prefer either Levantine or Egyptian Arabic" (Al-Batal & Belnap, 2006, p. 396). Interestingly, only 26% of the respondents reported a desire to learn the Iraqi dialect (n = 682, 15.4% agree, 10.6% strongly agree). Thus, the vast majority of students want to learn either Levantine or Egyptian Arabic. These are not only the two most commonly spoken and widely understood varieties of Spoken Arabic, but there are abundant materials available in each that would make it relatively painless for even a native Moroccan or Iraqi speaker to teach a class in Levantine or Egyptian; though the opposite is not viable.

As a final argument in favor of incorporating Spoken Arabic in program curricula, the language use of a public official is examined.

> "On the political level, a rather spectacular case of this manipulation of linguistic variation is to be found in the political speeches of the late President Nasser. He used to begin his speeches at an elevated level, spoken slowly and rhythmically, because of the formality of the situation. But then his sentences would become gradually more and more colloquial, spoken in a faster tempo, until he reached a purely colloquial level. At the end of his speech, he would conclude with a few sentences in pure Standard Arabic. Such a mixture reflects the inherent problem for politicians in the Arab world: on the one hand, by identifying with colloquial speech they wish to involve their audience, who for the most part do not use or even understand the higher levels of Standard Arabic, on the other hand, they cannot simply switch to colloquial language, since this would be regarded as an insult to their audience" (Versteegh, 2004, p. 196).

This passage sheds light on the diglossic nature of Arabic in two ways: first, it reveals that Nasser's audience – the common people – "do not use *or even understand*" MSA; and second, that Nasser felt obligated to include some MSA in order to fulfill his role as an educated persona (emphasis added) in a formal setting. Arabic speakers use and are exposed to a variety of registers on a daily basis. Students learning Arabic must do the same. It is easy to conclude that

foreign students would not be well received into Arab society if they could only produce MSA.

METHODOLOGY

Two surveys from the NMELRC, the first from over 650 students learning Arabic at over 37 U.S. institutions of higher education and a similar survey administered to 82 teachers of Arabic at over 30 institutions of higher education, provide the data for this paper. It should be noted that this research is exploratory in nature using only simple statistical procedures and that the data will be further investigated and analyzed using more complex statistical procedures in the future. This research should be considered a pilot for future statistical analysis.

The particular set of data used in this research from the student survey was gathered between April 2003 and April 2005. The teacher survey represents data gathered from May 2004 to August 2005. The data used in this research represent responses on the two surveys that pertained in some manner to the issue of learning and/or teaching Spoken Arabic. The surveys gathered detailed bio- and demographic information from each of the respondents. Most of the actual items in the survey, however, were multiple-choice Likert questions. The Likert scale was a five point rubric with a range of possible responses from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree," with "neutral" as a middle option.

RESULTS

The first item to be considered in this research is the response to the statement "I'm mainly studying Arabic because I want to, not because it is required or expected of me." Approximately 78% of the students, n=713, responded that they strongly agree with this statement, whereas an additional 9% selected "agree" rather than "strongly agree." Combined, the figure reaches 87%, showing that these students are studying Arabic because they want to. Only about 7% of the students disagreed, including strongly disagreed, with this statement. Students taking Arabic really want to be doing what they are doing!

One of the strongest responses in the student survey data in this research was to the item "Studying Arabic is important because it will allow me to interact with people who speak it," n=707. The total responses to "agree" (19.1%) and "strongly agree" (68.7%) equaled 88%, showing that the vast majority of the students are learning Arabic to communicate with native Arabic speakers. It must be noted, however, that this question did not specifically ask about a spoken variety of language, and it cannot be assumed that the students are fully aware of the diglossic nature of Arabic and the role of MSA versus the spoken varieties in the Arabic-speaking world. This issue will be addressed later.

Responses to an item specifically addressing teacher encouragement regarding the use of Spoken Arabic are quite indicative of the status of Spoken Arabic in the classroom. The responses are in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Instructor Encouragement

My instructor encourages students to use colloquial Arabic in informal conversations in the classroom.

Response	Value
Strongly Agree	94
Agree	99
Neutral	140
Disagree	133
Strongly Disagree	214
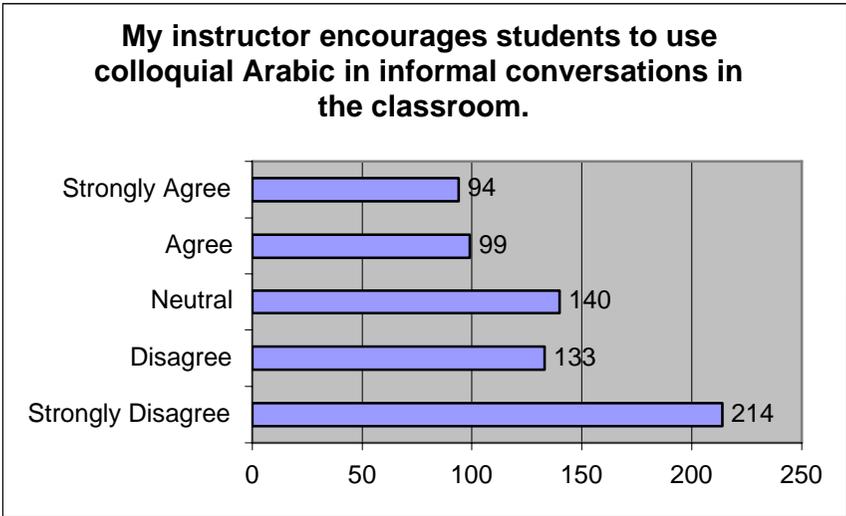
This table shows that only 28% of the total respondents, n=680, reported that their teachers encourage them to use colloquial Arabic in informal conversations in class (agree and strongly agree combined). Implications of these data are discussed later on.

The above data regarding teacher encouragement to Spoken Arabic correlate closely to an item on the teacher survey about their language variety beliefs. Responses are found in Table 3.

Table 3. Colloquial Varieties That Should Be Taught

What varieties of Arabic do you think students should be taught to speak in the first two years of instruction? Check all that apply.

*A mixture of MSA and

Response	Value
Other	2
A colloquial	30
Formal Spoken Arabic*	39
Modern Standard Arabic	55
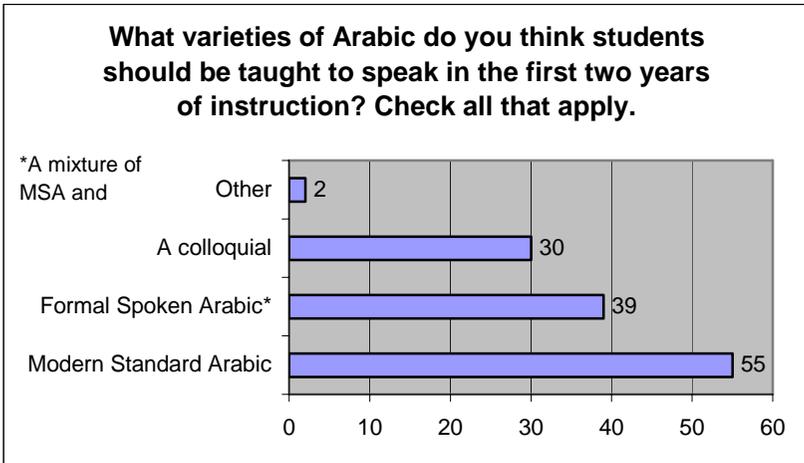
Approximately 67%, n= 82, of the respondents to this item answered that students should receive some sort of instruction in MSA, whereas 48% selected a mixture

of MSA and Spoken Arabic. It should be remembered that the teachers were allowed to select more than one answer in this item. Only about 37% selected Spoken Arabic as a variety that should be taught in the first two years of instruction. This lack of interest in teaching Spoken Arabic to novice students contradicts student desire to communicate in Spoken Arabic.

As noted earlier, 88% of the student respondents to the survey reported that they were learning Arabic to interact with people who speak it. The student survey also addressed the issue of Spoken Arabic specifically. Table 4 shows that the majority of the students want to learn Spoken Arabic immediately.

Table 4. <u>Using Colloquial Arabic</u>
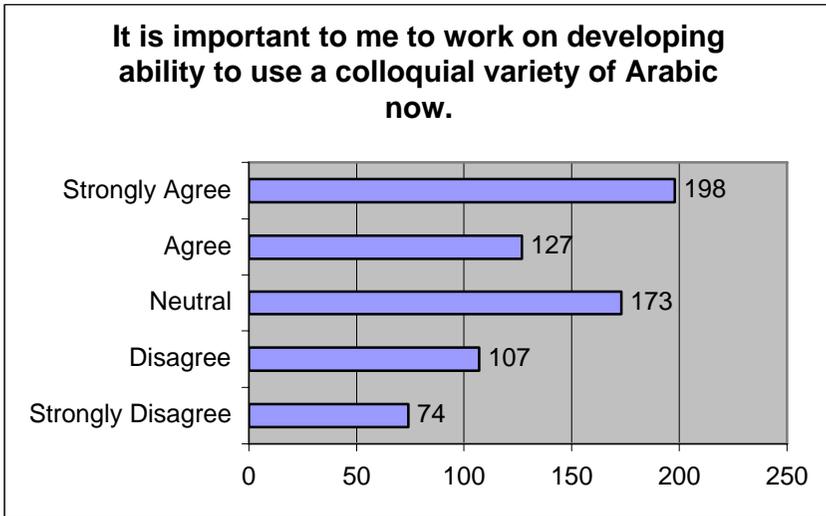
This table show us that more students want to be able to use Spoken Arabic now than those who do not. Most students agreed strongly to this item, followed by a neutral response, then agree, and finally, disagree and strongly disagree. The high neutral response rate of 25% is discussed in the next section.

An interesting comparison is made knowing that the majority of the students do want to learn Spoken Arabic and want to communicate with native speakers, though this majority is not encouraged to use Spoken Arabic in informal situations by their teachers. This disparity is reflected in the responses to the item "Language lessons should be relevant to the students' learning goals" in which 74% of the students agreed or strongly agreed. Thus we see that something is not right in Arabic classrooms. Students who believe that lesson plans should be relevant to their goals are not receiving enough relevant instruction to prepare them for culturally successful communication. Students want to communicate with native Arabic speakers. This cannot be accomplished if students are exposed only to MSA. Would students who only know MSA succeed in the Arabic-speaking world? This paper does not seek to answer this particular rhetorical

question directly, though the possibility of travel to the Arabic-speaking world is addressed in the survey. The issue of travel to the Arabic-speaking world elicited a strong rate of positive response with "agree" (24.3%) and "strongly agree" (55%) representing 79% of the respondents, n=713. Most students studying Arabic want to use what they are learning in real life situations in the Arabic-speaking world.

The above data show that students want to travel to the Arabic-speaking world and communicate with native Arabic speakers. As mentioned earlier in this paper, students will more easily integrate into Arab society if they can communicate in Spoken Arabic. Students who do travel to the Arabic-speaking world will find that the general populace communicates almost exclusively in Spoken Arabic, and not in MSA. The students' teachers are hopefully preparing them for this. It should be noted, however, that 59% of the teachers in the survey (n=82) reported Arabic as their native language. Knowing that the majority of the respondents are native speakers who come from a society in which "it remains difficult…to arouse interest in the dialects as a serious object of study" may be the reason for the lack of enthusiasm toward the teaching of Spoken Arabic (Versteegh, 2004, p. 132). This observation is unfortunate considering that students learning Arabic want to be able to communicate with native speakers. Spoken Arabic, not MSA, is the language of daily communication.

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

The NMELRC student survey has shown that students taking Arabic appear to be highly motivated to learn the language. Approximately 87% of the students who took the survey said they are taking Arabic because they want to, not because of someone else's expectations, and 88% of the students are learning Arabic to interact with native speakers. It is hoped that these students will remain motivated to learn Arabic, even if their programs do not offer Spoken Arabic. Arabic departments should be aware, however, that students who become conscious of what might be considered the ineffectuality of learning MSA to communicate and integrate successfully with native speakers might lose that motivation. Departments and teachers alike should consider this in their philosophy and other calculations.

The low response rate pertaining to teacher encouragement for the use of Spoken Arabic in informal situations conforms to low teacher enthusiasm for the learning of spoken varieties in the first two years of Arabic instruction. These teachers may not be presenting an accurate picture of the linguistic reality in the Arabic-speaking world. This is unfortunate, considering that 48% as opposed to 27% of the students reported that learning Spoken Arabic now is important to them. It should be noted, however, that the student responses to the item about learning Spoken Arabic "now" do not reveal which levels of Arabic are represented. It is unknown how many of these responses come from novice students. Future research should examine this in more detail. The 26% neutral response in this item is perplexing, though it may well be due to lack of student knowledge pertaining to the actual preference of Spoken Arabic by native

speakers (outside of the classroom!). Truly, it is hard to imagine that teachers who are not in favor of teaching Spoken Arabic would emphasize the need for students to be able to communicate in it. Students might simply not be aware of the fundamental divide in language use in the Arabic-speaking world. This could be another question to pursue in future research.

As for language lessons and student goals, "coordinators and instructors would probably do well to re-examine their priorities and their students' priorities and consider their timetable and their students' timetable" (Belnap, 1995, p. 62). If students want to learn to communicate and learn Spoken Arabic, language lessons must accommodate. The survey shows that students do want to communicate with native Arabic speakers and they want to learn Spoken Arabic. Travel to the Arabic-speaking world is also an important issue for many of these students. Nearly 80% of the respondents to the item about traveling to the Arabic-speaking world indicated this as a strong desire. It goes without saying that they will need to know a spoken variety of Arabic to integrate and avoid linguistic embarrassment. Some embarrassment is likely to be experienced no matter how prepared students are, though knowing a widely-understood variety will surely reduce anxiety and issues related to social isolation.

Adding the teaching of Spoken Arabic to a curriculum may not be an easy task. The formation and implementation of curricular change does not fall within the scope of this paper. This paper seeks to show that students want to learn Spoken Arabic. Future research should investigate how best to implement such an undertaking. Some modest suggestions, however, are given here. After language instructors and other appropriate departmental faculty have conducted a student needs analysis and agreed upon the introduction of teaching Spoken Arabic (and the variety/ies), more practical considerations will need to be determined. It is suggested that such departments look to the few contemporary institutions that offer an integrated approach to learning MSA and Spoken Arabic, namely Brigham Young University, Cornell University and the University of Amsterdam. Materials from these universities could be scrutinized and adapted to the local setting. Development of new materials will most likely be required. Such materials should be as authentic as possible. Unfortunately, there are very few materials available for the teaching of Spoken Arabic. This is likely due to the lack of enthusiasm for the teaching of Spoken Arabic to begin with. It is hoped that such materials will become more widely available in the near future.

The NMELRC student survey has shown that students taking Arabic seem highly motivated to study and that they want to speak with native Arabic speakers. The reluctance of their teachers to teach spoken varieties is out of sync with student goals. Students want to learn Spoken Arabic. The lack of instruction in Spoken Arabic represents an unfortunate paradox in the field of Arabic learning and teaching that remains unresolved. The author hopes that this research will contribute positively to this important topic.

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