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Web-Arabic as Lingua Franca (WALF): Variation and Standard in Teaching Arabic as Foreign Language (TAFL)

1. INTRODUCTION

The teaching of Arabic has been challenged in recent decades by new developments regarding factors such as the growing number of multilingual and multicultural classrooms, widespread exposure to varieties of "Arabics" through the multimedia and the emerging use of Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) as a lingua franca in intercultural online communication. Moreover, the emergence of innovative approaches and methods, and the changes in the cultural and professional needs of learners, has led to profound innovations in the teaching of foreign languages. One of the most hotly-debated issues in recent years regards how students should be exposed to language variation, not only from a theoretical, but also from a practical point of view, i.e., through methods based on the analysis and comparison of authentic texts. In this respect, research into the teaching of Arabic lags somewhat behind that of research into the teaching of European languages. Issues of language variation, discussed in philology and dialectology studies, have yet to affect teaching methodology.

Since Ferguson's article on diglossia (1959), various scholars have explored the issue of variation and made important contributions to our knowledge of language in Arabophone countries (Badawi 1973; Hary 1996; Mejdell 2012). What emerges from the various theories and interpretations proposed as regards language variation and communication is the need to see Arabic as a language that is subject, like any other language, to factors

that privilege flexibility and for it to be tailored to the needs of its speakers. Any clear-cut separation between a High and a Low Variety, represented by written/oral and formal/informal distinctions, has given way to observing intermediate varieties positioned on a cline that covers mechanisms of code-mixing that speakers activate within the same text. This is supported by the theory according to which MSA must be seen as a term that does, in fact, comprise different varieties, such as the Arabic of the media: the latter evidences forms of simplification that still require rigorous investigation (Ryding 1991).

This rethinking of diglossic theory has not generally led to any deep reconsideration of teaching in terms of the material used in the teaching of Arabic as a Second Language. Indeed, linguistic reality is not reflected in coursebooks, and Arabic still appears as a monolithic, unchanging language. Any renewal regarding teaching must, indeed, start from a redefinition of new textual sources; from this perspective, online texts – and the Web-Arabic they represent – are a valuable vast resource for teachers. The Arabic found on the Internet is extremely varied, not only due to individual cultural and ideological choices, but also due to the diverse communicative contexts it presents. In fact, various bloggers, while resorting to standard Arabic in order to overcome national differences, still draw upon many dialectical features. Close analysis shows not only a consistent degree of interference as regards colloquial varieties, but also that many marked features are shared by different Arab-speaking internauts whatever their geographical origin might be. This variety, largely seen as MSA with some common dialectal features, is increasingly accepted by young people as a privileged form of communication, and to an extent that it might now be defined as a lingua franca. This new variety of MSA is not, however, recognized in either teaching practices or in the recent critical assessments of MSA. This resistance, probably based on ideological assumptions that Standard Arabic cannot include colloquial (dialectal) forms or rooted in years of traditional teaching practices, has prompted some Arabists to use various labels such as Formal Spoken Arabic (Ryding 1990), Educated Spoken Arabic (Mitchell 1986) in order to refer to the same thing. It thus precludes any attempt at rethinking the nature of MSA and how it might be taught.

This new perspective should lead to a rethinking of the methodology of TAFL as well as some deep reflection on the best methods for introducing students to the issue of variation: in this, the role of the teacher is fundamental. New ways of devising patterns, models and activities in terms of educa-

tional aims and of language awareness activities require a closer investigation of data in order to elicit teachers' reflections and challenge existing beliefs about language and language competence (Freeman 1989; Sifakis 2007).

The present study illustrates how a group of Italian teachers of Arabic participating in pre- and in-service teacher education courses led by a non-native teacher trainer were introduced to Web-Arabic as Lingua Franca (WALF) [1]. This was done through exposure, i.e., by referencing and analyzing a collection of language samples taken from selected websites. The teachers' knowledge of Arabic, inevitably challenged by this experience of WALF, led to a shift in position in terms of their own role in an institutional context that demands certain fixed standards in language achievement.

2. ARABIC TEACHER EDUCATION: A NEW PERSPECTIVE

Language teaching practices and teacher education for Arabic have been questioned in recent years due to various processes such as the growing number of multicultural contexts and classrooms, the exposure of both learners and teachers to different varieties of Arabic through the multimedia, as well as the shifting role of non-native teachers and teacher trainers in institutional contexts. These issues call for a rethinking of the directions that teaching practice should take, and include a reconsideration of the curriculum and language policy regarding Arabic.

Indeed, traditional methods, based on the grammar-translation method, have had to take into account a new approach to teaching modern languages. A decisive factor in this rethinking of methodology is providing students with new teaching material. This evidences a shift in interest from teaching to learning, the latter understood as a social practice through which students construct their own linguistic skills. In this regard, the issue of oral communication has attracted the attention of many scholars, involving a whole new idea of the teacher's role. Teachers no longer control and regulate learning, but act as mediators who create situations for learning (Joanassen 2000) and facilitate the emergence of learning routes by which students find their own way forward.

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[1] The present work follows various studies on ELF (English as Lingua Franca) such as Lopriore 2016 and Santipolo 2017.

In order to widen and reformulate traditional Arabic language teaching, particularly in a profession where the teacher's concept of the language is strongly linked to their own learning experiences, any change in perspective must start from an observation of the language itself. As for monitoring learners' and teachers' awareness of Web-Arabic as Lingua Franca, it is crucial to start from authentic texts, and to find new ways to describe and present forms of variation in Arabic. This aspect is particularly important in both pre- and in-service teacher education courses where language awareness activities should be an integral part of the language teaching process. This aspect requires a broader and deeper investigation of both real texts and language data in order to affect teachers' reflections and challenge existing beliefs about language and linguistic competence. According to Bolitho (2003), language awareness develops through paying attention to language in use, enabling language learners to gradually gain new insights into how languages work. Helping learners to gain such insights also provides a pedagogical approach.

This study will discuss implications for WALF-aware teachers with regard to approaches and materials that aim to enhance learners' awareness of variation by examining WALF texts.

3. CAN WALF BE CONSIDERED A LINGUA FRANCA?

The original meaning of lingua franca [2] was an intermediary language used by speakers of Arabic with travelers from Western Europe. Its meaning was later extended to describe a fairly stable language variety used for commercial purposes with little room for individual variation. Nowadays the term is used in linguistic studies to refer to global languages, such as English, which are widely spoken by non-native speakers and beyond national borders. With regard to English, English as Lingua Franca (ELF) is neither a language for specific purposes nor a pidgin. It is not a restricted code, but a language with a full linguistic and functional range (Kachru 1997) and serves as a "contact language between persons who share neither a common native tongue nor a common national culture and for whom English is the chosen foreign language of communication" (Firth 1996, 240).

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[2] The term Lingua Franca derives from the Arabic Lisan al-Faranǧ.

In an attempt to define lingua franca from a formal perspective, Gramkow Andersen (1993,108) describes ELF as follows: "there is no consistency in form that goes beyond the participant level, i.e., each combination of interactants seems to negotiate and govern their own variety of lingua franca in terms of proficiency level, use of code-mixing, degree of pidginization, etc.".

Web-Arabic is an instrument that is open to change and innovation, and it is becoming the lingua franca of widespread online communication. The idea of Web-Arabic as Lingua Franca, following on from pedagogical models and linguistic studies in ELF, is the starting point of the present work. In the teaching of English as a Foreign Language, the idea of ELF has determined the emergence of new teaching methodologies and the choice of new materials. Although the linguistic and sociolinguistic context of ELF differs from that regarding Arabic, certain similarities make for an interesting interpretation of the changes that have affected Arabic over the last two decades. Indeed, ELF is defined as a flexible language, reconstructed and created at a local level and in various contexts by speakers of various L1s, which involves adapting one's own communicative skills to different communicative situations (Santipolo 2017). If we accept the general observation that standard Arabic is not the mother tongue of any Arabic speaker, and that educational level does not guarantee actual skill in using the official language, we can surmise that MSA is a lingua franca for Arabic internauts that individuals create using linguistic features of the L1, that is, their own dialect. This causes interference between the two varieties. The option of adding Arabic as Lingua Franca to course content also involves reconsidering the abilities and skills that students need. For this reason, teachers of Arabic should also face the fact that handling this variety may well become a skill that students need to acquire during their studies.

4. WEB-LANGUAGES AND FEATURES OF WEB-ARABIC

The emergence of social networks and online forms of communication has brought about a revolution in terms of text production: users can communicate in real time on the most varied topics, and they have a freedom of expression that is not found with other text types (Androtsopoulos 2006). These texts can be a fundamental resource in the teaching of foreign languages. In contrast to European languages, studies into the teaching of Arabic are still at

a relatively rudimentary stage, and approaches to language teaching, as with syllabus design, are often left to the individual teacher. Recent approaches to teaching do, however, involve reviewing methods that have been adopted up to the present, and to some updating of course content. Computer Mediated Communication is of fundamental importance in sourcing teaching material, and it encourages, also thanks to its often interactive nature, adopting new methodologies. The Web space represents a new communicative platform in which variation is the main characteristic. Several definitions have been given for online languages, such as Internet-Slang, Webslang, Chattish and Netspeak (Castells 2000; Danet 2001; Androtsopoulos 2004), and all refer to non-standardized and extremely differentiated language use both in terms of typographical usage and linguistic content. In his studies of e-mails, Crystal (2001), for example, identifies some distinctive functional elements, particularly regional linguistic interference. These texts display marked colloquial features, a non-standardized use of syntax and a specific lexis. Baym (1998) identifies certain linguistic features that show the emergence of a homogenous online community with a shared lexis, distinctive non-verbal forms of communication and cultural references. The online community comprises participants that create and codify specific meanings for the group that negotiates identity. It establishes relationships and the norms that govern interaction, thereby renewing and sharing a language. So far, the language variation aspect found in online communication has only been investigated in a marginal way, although a growing number of studies has highlighted the fact that multilingualism is a dominant feature of the Internet.

As regards Arabic, this has largely been explored in relation to the influence of English and to evidence of linguistic diversity. Indeed, the triumph of informality that characterizes Web-Arabic has encouraged recourse to the vernacular, which brings about a codification of varieties that have traditionally been restricted to oral communication[3]. The birth of the Internet and the spread of social networks have conditioned language use in many ways: this freedom of expression has led many users to write in dialect or make use of colloquial varieties. Furthermore, sharing a text with a potentially vast number of users has ensured that the process of language standardization, which once occurred slowly and was entrusted to authorities in academies, has grown at such a pace that it can now be said that online writing is the main source of language renewal and spelling change.

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[3] About this issue also see Waheed 2008 and Langone 2016.

The lack of support for displaying Arabic characters on computers and cell phones has had a dual outcome. On the one hand, it has meant that users of the Internet partly rely on foreign languages, particularly in bilingual or multilingual contexts such as Lebanon; on the other hand, it means that solutions have been found – often non-uniform solutions – for writing Arabic using the Latin alphabet. Terms like Arabish or Arabizi (Yaghan 2008) refer to the writing system that Arab users adopt on social networks. In recent years, scholars have started to examine this new language, characterized by distinctive phraseology and lexis, the frequent use of abbreviations, increasingly generalized usage and basic prosodic features. There are also new spellings to render specific Arabic phonemes such as *hamza*, conveyed by the number '2' or *ḥā* with '7'. There is still little research into Arabish, however, and there appears to be scant awareness, above all in Arabophone countries, of the revolutionary implications of these new forms of communication, and of the consequences that its use implies for the language in general. It should be emphasized, however, that although users feel free to express themselves in dialect, standard Arabic remains the variety found most frequently on the Internet. The main point to make, however, is that we tend to think that the standard language is unchangeable with inflexible rules, just as the grammar books continue to tell us.

The situation, however, has changed considerably: the standard language used in CMC is particularly flexible and that flexibility is rooted in the way that speakers use it. Many of them turn to it as a supranational language, although this does not prevent it from having the morphosyntactic and lexical features of their own mother tongue, that is to say, their own dialect. Various standard versions thus appear, each one traceable to a specific geolinguistic area. Scholars of Arabic such as Ryding and Mitchell have spoken of Formal Spoken Arabic (FSA) or Educated Spoken Arabic (ESA); apart from the labels used in defining this variety, it should be emphasized that every country has its own version of formal Arabic. This is an extremely important issue, not just from a historical-linguistic viewpoint, but also with regard to teaching the language. Variation, seen as change to the official form and as an intrinsic feature of language that allows for the different uses of a language, is a fundamental aspect that teaching a foreign language has to recognize. In this respect, texts found on the Internet are fresh and extremely versatile sources of material. As a supranational language, MSA is not restricted by strict norms and unchanging usage, but, like all other languages, is something that is molded by its speakers.

Language uses linked to Web-Arabic are going through a transitional stage in which the variability of standard Arabic has become its most significant feature, and users themselves are acquiring notable linguistic awareness. The choice of which variation to use is by no means casual, but based upon social, political and ideological factors other than the context of use. This is an ongoing process and it is difficult to foresee future developments: what is clear is that the interaction of Arab speakers from different geographical areas that has occurred with online texts has demonstrated just how linguistically dynamic the Arabophone community is.

5. THE STUDY

The present study was carried out between 2013 and 2015 during TFA courses at Roma Tre University and UNINT (Università degli Studi Internazionali di Roma). The project aimed at introducing pre- and in-service teachers to the theme of variation in teaching practice. This regarded forms of intervention in order to stimulate trainees' awareness of WAFL, and directly involve teachers in the evaluation and development of materials.

5.1. Research questions

In order to identify strategies for raising WALF-awareness in training courses for TAFL teachers as well as enhancing their ability to plan suitable learning activities, the research questions of the study were as follows:

- Which aspects of Arabic language teaching and learning encourage teachers' awareness of the current uses of Arabic?
- Might this awareness cause a crisis in traditional teaching in terms of teaching strategies and linguistic content?
- Which activities and tasks can enhance the teacher's ability to adapt and produce teaching materials using WAFL?

5.2. Course participants and course description

The TFA courses lasted for 14 weeks and the courses were attended by an overage of 15 to 25 participants, mostly Italian native speakers with a degree

in foreign languages. The teacher trainer courses were divided into two main sessions: one on Arabic culture and literature from an intercultural perspective and one on Arabic language teaching heavily geared towards a variationist perspective. Formal and informal texts were examined and trainees were provided with a considerable sub-session on Web-Arabic. The language session included:

- formal and informal texts: linguistic analysis and data;
- teaching courses;
- WALF and variation in Arabic texts.

The sessions involved individual and group activities with a series of reflective tasks based on specific written input. The main target of these activities was to focus trainees' attention on the various Arabics present in the authentic texts and to demonstrate how a monolithic vision of MSA is inappropriate both from a theoretical and from a pedagogical perspective.

The participants, all educated using traditional methods in standard Arabic, were asked to reconsider their beliefs regarding Arabic and its plurality, and to adapt their teaching practices to a language whose borders are increasingly mobile and hard to define. During the Web-Arabic session, samples from blog websites (as shown briefly in 5.3) and extracts from social networks were analysed. Through the exploration of these texts, trainees became increasingly aware of the existence of the pragmatic and theoretical features of Web-Arabic as Lingua Franca. This newly acquired awareness led to a rethinking of learners' needs and the role of the teacher.

5.3. Some samples

Of the numerous texts taken from blogs and social network conversations, the brief passages below illustrate some of the linguistic features that were examined during the training course. Capital letters have been used to highlight the elements that exemplify the linguistic feature in question.

> *suḥufī miṣrī ibn madrasa al-iḫwān al-muslimīn dāyib fī ḥubb miṣr wa-B-yakrah al-fasād wa-l-istibdād.*
> An Egyptian journalist, graduate of the school of the Muslim Brothers, who loves Egypt dearly and who hates corruption and despotism. [4]

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[4] Ana-ikhwan.blogspot.com (last accessed June 2015).

al-suʾāl al-ǧawharī ILLI ḤA-yaḥḍur ḤA-yaḥḍur lee? Aqṣud yaʿnī muḫaṭaba al-ʿā lam al-islāmī min miṣr wa-hiyya fī ḥāla DĪ?
The essential question is, those who're going to attend, why are they going to attend? I mean, to speak to the Islamic world from Egypt while she is in this state? [5]

Ilà min MĀ B-yaʿrif yaktub inklīzī […] yadḫul hunā
To those who do not write English, enter here [6]

Kayfa aʿrif INNUH al-ḫidma intahat?
How can I know that the service is over? [7]

The items marked by capital letters are largely colloquial features: at present the preverbal morpheme *b-* (for the non-past tense) and *ḥa-* (to mark the future) are typical features of many dialects that are generally understood and widely used internationally. These, together with extremely widespread forms such as the relative *illī* 'that, who', are considered an integral part of Arabic to the extent that they can be found alongside standard forms even within the same text. Other features, like the negative particle *mā* found in classical Arabic, are used in these texts in "unconventional" ways, in line with developments that can be seen as natural processes of simplification: the use of the particle, usually linked to verbs in the past, is used in this case both for the past and the non-past.

5.4. Insights provided by WALF

After analysing the Web-Arabic texts, trainee reactions became more critical when they were asked to plan teaching material and the prototype of a coursebook based on the texts under consideration. The main task here was to raise awareness of aspects ignored by the coursebooks currently used in the teaching of Arabic. Responses included the following comments:

- "There is no mention of the idea of linguistic variation" (T3).
- "Arabic seems to be a language with no contact with reality" (T5).

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[5] Tahyyes.blogspot. com (last accessed May 2015).
[6] www.albawaba.com (last accessed April 2015).
[7] www.mobily.com.sa/portalsametime/jforum/posts/list/33107.page (last accessed July 2014).

- "Arabic coursebooks are only planned for translators; the grammatical element still prevails" (T9).
- "Coursebook material is very poor and fossilized in unrealistic communicative exchanges. Multimedia and Web-Arabic texts offer endless potential for material" (T10).
- "The teaching of Arabic is very backward looking. New coursebooks are not very different from those published years ago. The lexicon is undoubtedly more realistic, but the approach is still very far from the changes that Arabic has experienced in recent decades. You only have to look at real texts to realize this" (T12).

Trainees were also asked to plan lessons and activities from a WALF-aware perspective. What was understood, and put into practice, was to adapt the linguistic features included according to different communicative contexts. Code-mixing and the presence of colloquialisms were aspects that captured the attention of trainees the most: these were introduced into lesson plans as a functional means of developing "real" language interaction, both written and oral. The main aim of such plans was to raise students' awareness that Arabic is as much a living language as their native tongue.

6. Conclusions

The preliminary findings presented in this paper are the starting point for more extensive research that inevitably calls for further studies and investigation. Some parts of the present study, such as the trainees' full answers to the questionnaires, their response to the language activities and all the material, including their lesson plans, cannot be presented here for reasons of space.

Even so, it is possible to draw some conclusions and answer some of the study's research questions. The first of these regards the shift in the trainees' teaching awareness after the 14-week course. Overall, trainees became aware of aspects that are lacking in the traditional approach to TAFL and of the opportunities that Web-Arabic as Lingua Franca offers in terms of a critical linguistic approach, and as a source for texts. Trainees were mostly struck by the fact that Web-Arabic is not an uncodified, bizarre linguistic derivation of Arabic, but that its code-mixing and use of colloquialisms are an integral part of Arabic. This renders it a living language, with a high degree of negotiability, and this, as we have seen, is an indispensable characteristic of a lingua franca.

One aspect that surely helped in creating this new awareness can be linked to the approach adopted during the course; this characterized all the lessons, including exploring the various resources, from finding the actual texts to analyzing them. We can only hope that further studies on the subject will usher in new language policies: adopting a WALF-aware approach in teacher training courses involves the introduction of new techniques rather than reinforcing traditional approaches. Although this may challenge teachers' beliefs and their view of Arabic, the present study highlights that the main difficulty lies not in teachers' resistance to change but on the challenge of selecting and adapting materials. Above all, new activities need to be implemented and new strategies need to be found.

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ABSTRACT

One of the most interesting issues in second language teaching is how students should be exposed to language variation using methods based on the analysis and comparison of authentic texts. In this respect, research regarding the teaching of Arabic is relatively lacking. Moreover, in recent years Arabic has been changing rapidly, strongly influenced by the social networks. The most evident result of this is the emergence of Web-Arabic, which can be regarded as a lingua franca in online communication. Although characterized by a prevalent use of Standard Arabic, it is also marked by recourse to colloquialisms and dialectal features. The present study illustrates how a group of Italian teachers of Arabic participating in teacher education courses were introduced to the teaching of language variation through the analysis of Web-Arabic as Lingua Franca (WALF). The most significant preliminary findings are that WALF can provide an innovative tool in the teaching of variation in Arabic and provide stimulating considerations for new strategies.