



Language program coordination during the pandemic: Challenges encountered and lessons learned

Mahmoud Azaz, The University of Arizona

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The Very Busy Time Before the Storm

On Sunday March 1st 2020, I sighed with relief at the end of the successful 34th Annual Symposium on Arabic Linguistics that I organized at the University of Arizona in collaboration with the Arabic Linguistics Society. The event kept me extremely busy throughout January and February with numerous meetings and arrangements for guests including Noam Chomsky. Two days before the event, I got an email from one of the international presenters canceling their presentation due to the fear of the pandemic (I honestly thought the cancellation was not justified and that the presenter's fear was not legitimate). By March 2nd, everyone had left, and I was looking forward to taking some time to relax during spring recess (March 9th-13th) and to reconcile the conference's finances with the business manager before classes resumed on March 16th. But that afternoon, the University of Arizona announced the cancelation of all conferences and symposia. A few days later, the president and the provost announced the COVID-19 Mitigation Plan that included a shift to remote teaching to begin on March 18th.

On the same day, I received an email from the department chair asking all the faculty and teaching assistants to attend training sessions on the abrupt transition to remote teaching (I suddenly realized that the conference attendee had been justified in canceling her presentation!). Even though I was very familiar with Zoom videoconferencing having used it for many meetings and committees, I had never used it for office hours or for classes. Although I had had a few summer school students take elementary Arabic via Skype over the years, I had never offered a course entirely online. Therefore, I decided to attend the Zoom training sessions organized by the Office of Instruction and Assessment to learn how to adapt my language teaching to the online environment.

The Arabic program at the University of Arizona has three tenured associate professors (all affiliated with the PhD program in Second Language Acquisition and Teaching), three instructors, and many teaching assistants, most of them at the PhD level. Dr. Sonia Shiri directs the program including the Flagship. I serve as the coordinator of the basic Arabic language program and I mentor and train the teaching assistants, update the curriculum, and hold weekly meetings. The program's instructional team is familiar with technology and trained to teach in synchronous and asynchronous environments. When the transition to remote teaching was announced, I was teaching a second-semester course with almost full enrollment (five credits, twenty-five students) and an upper-division course on Arabic language variation (three credits, eleven students), in addition to my duties as language program coordinator.

It is Going to be Okay, but the Asynchronous Format is Not on the Table

In the evening, I contacted my close collaborator, Sonia Shiri, to chat a bit. We have never been in this situation before! We agreed that it was going to be okay; our structure was good and our team was well-

trained. But, the asynchronous modality was not on the table. The next day, I woke up very early in the morning and had my coffee in the backyard of my house with my notes in hand thinking of a plan. To be honest, the bewildering course of events with the pandemic has raised many questions about my duties as a language coordinator and instructor: How do I support the teaching assistants to engage students in collaborative learning remotely? What adaptations do I need to make in the requirements of both the lower-division courses and the upper-division courses? For example, should I reduce my expectations for the number of quizzes and oral presentations? How were these adaptations going to impact the learning outcomes? How do I calculate attendance and participation? How do I keep the Zoom sessions interactive, motivating and energetic, and share the same spirit with instructors and teaching assistants? I had other questions about my pedagogical research that depends primarily on having the students in-person (but I had to forget about this for now). So many questions, but very few answers!

The key words that kept echoing in my mind in this planning session were *simplicity*, *empathy*, *flexibility*, and *interaction*. I viewed these as the guiding principles to combat this crisis, and I listed some specific things under each. But there were dilemmas: some of these things conflicted with certain course policies. For example, how does one practice empathy and flexibility while keeping the course requirements in place? Also, how to maintain active student-instructor interaction in Zoom, particularly in lower-division courses? Interaction is high during an in-person format, and I expected it to suffer in the new format. Also, how to address issues of the Arabic script and sound system in lower division courses when interaction is constrained?

I hurried to my office and rehearsed a teaching session with my wife who played the role of a student connecting from home over Zoom. I took notes of glitches and I reflected upon them for the rest of the day. I was in contact with colleagues in other Arabic programs who were scheduled to start Zoom teaching before the University of Arizona. I reached out to Ayman Mohamed who coordinates the basic Arabic program at Michigan State University, and we had a long conversation about how his first days had gone. Ayman said many interesting things, two of which I honestly did not expect: the students were very motivated, and the breakout rooms in Zoom were time consuming and sometimes distracting. Indeed, Ayman's second remark was very frustrating, because I had thought that Zoom would enhance interaction and add energy to pair and group work activities. Later in the week, I met with the Arabic instructional team over Zoom and I shared the insights I had learned from Ayman. I organized a meeting with first-year teaching assistants and talked about some of the challenges and possible solutions.

Do Not Reinvent the Wheel

In first and second semester courses, I warned the teaching assistants not to reinvent the wheel. I used our regular lesson plans and materials with some minor adaptations. The shift to remote teaching was certainly smooth due to previous planning for the in-person format (we always keep our learning management system, D2L, very organized), but there were some issues that I had to handle. The first issue was how to teach the script and writing remotely. I purchased a physical board and asked the learners to take notes as they did in the physical classroom. I started to pay more attention to the neatness and clarity of my handwriting. Also, I asked all the students to take screenshots of the board, categorize them by section (grammar, vocabulary, and culture), and save them in their folders. The transition to online teaching gave the students the opportunity to practice typing in Arabic more frequently. Fortunately, the whiteboard in Zoom is compatible with Arabic and it has a good number of tools that enable students to text, format, and save their outcomes. The fact that we introduced typing early in the first semester course made it easy for the students to type. A second issue was how to provide feedback on writing in remote teaching. I simply asked the learners to upload the written assignments (in pdf or image formats) in the D2L. The same strategies for grading and giving feedback in face-to-face settings were followed, using the comments function in Adobe pdf that was compatible with Arabic. It is true that giving feedback via Zoom in individual sessions took more time, but surprisingly, the outcomes in writing were superior. In the in-person format, some students had found it hard to come to the office hours but Zoom made it easier for them.

A third issue was how to provide ample opportunities for students to practice speaking in pair and group work. Activities in the breakout rooms took more time than what I had planned, and I did not have the opportunity to join all the groups in the same session to check their performance. But I was fortunate to have a graduate classroom assistant who worked as a guide in the rooms. We alternated between the different groups each session, and he gave me his feedback. The students were given one role-play task to accomplish in each lesson and they collaborated with their peers out of class and uploaded the videos to the D2L. Their outcomes were evaluated with the same rubrics I had used for the in-person format. A fourth issue was Zoom fatigue, which became very obvious after the third week of remote learning. The students' motivation and enthusiasm for remote teaching did not last long! This negatively impacted their attendance and participation rates. Knowing that this would happen, starting March 26 all the Zoom sessions were video-recorded and shared with the students using the University of Arizona Box. They were saved by date so that the learners could listen to them at their convenience.

Keep the Course Requirements in Place with Flexibility and Empathy

Although the surrounding atmosphere called for flexibility, I did not make major changes in the first- and second-semester courses. I advised the teaching assistants to do the same. All the quizzes and exams and presentations for Standard Arabic and the dialect/s were still required, and no major reduction of homework assignments was made. Also, the course content was completed except a very small portion in the last lesson. The view I shared with the teaching assistants was that first and second semester courses are foundational, and they determine student performance in subsequent years. However, I was very flexible and responsive to students' requests; I extended the deadlines, there were no penalties for late work, and make-ups were permitted. I knew that some students were struggling with finding work, physical and mental wellness, and internet access issues.

The higher-division content course on Arabic language variation was a different experience, although it was taught synchronously as well. The course was designed in the form of modules (each devoted to a certain topic) and no textbook was used. It required extensive reading out of class with the help of handouts. It also required active participation in discussion (in class and in threads on the D2L). I cut only one module from the course content. Using the University of Arizona Box, I shared all the video-recorded sessions online. The students submitted their projects and essays online. All individual meetings were conducted over Zoom. The nature of the course necessitated more asynchronous work allowing room for self-paced, independent learning. In my judgment, this course was less stressful to the students (and to me) and the breakout rooms created a dynamic learning space.

The University of Arizona announced the pass-fail option system and added details early enough. I read the article by Colleen Flaherty in *Inside Higher Ed* titled, "Grading for a pandemic: how lenient, or not, should professors be with students right now?" Although the opportunity-evaluation debate in the article made more sense in some fields such as medicine and economics, I thought that having a letter grade for a strategic language such as Arabic on the transcripts would help my students as they navigated their career years later. I advised them to think it over, and most students did not opt for it.

For Graduate Teaching Assistants: Observe, Model, and Consult

I knew that more communication with the teaching assistants would be needed after remote teaching had started. In addition to our weekly meetings on Thursdays, I touched base with them individually almost every day by email and sometimes over the phone. Before these meetings, I used to reflect on how my online sessions had gone during the week. I prepared tips for discussion with the teaching assistants. I also shared input by email and updated the drobox course folder more frequently. Training and mentoring teaching assistants mattered. I knew that one of them was not very familiar with instructional technology and did not have well-grounded knowledge in pedagogy and second language acquisition. They frequently joined my section online where I demonstrated how to engage students in collaborative learning over Zoom.

I met with them to elaborate on the rationale for certain pedagogical procedures. They found these observations effective, and I was pleased to observe them engage students online more successfully.

Too Much Technology is Overwhelming

The transition to remote teaching has expectedly brought many technological tools and buzz words and phrases to the foreground. I cannot count the emails I received from the University as well as from private providers about new tools for enhancing language instruction during the crisis. The University of Arizona made available a good number of tools for every purpose and embedded these into D2L. The insight that teaching assistants shared with me was that too many tools proved overwhelming for the students. Therefore, I tried to limit things to two or three new tools per course.

From “It’s Amazing” to “I Wanna Go Back to School”

The pandemic has had a deep impact on my professional and personal life. I had developed the habit of working from my office on campus, sometimes on the weekends. The pandemic made me prepare a well-equipped space for working from home with less disruption from our two kids, seven and five years old. I discovered early on that this did not work as well as I had anticipated. In the beginning, my five-year old son and I were motivated about his online learning. But by the end of the first week, his responses shifted from “It’s amazing” to “I wanna go back to school to play with Quinn” (his close friend). I experienced the same phenomenon, proving the Wordsworthian wisdom that “the child is the father of the man.” I want to go back to the normal; I want to meet with my colleagues, students, and teaching assistants in-person and have *real* conversations. The pandemic has disrupted the neat division between my personal and my professional life, and as a result, I am less productive than before.

Moving Forward

The pandemic crisis has been an opportunity to better understand the needs of some students; some were more vulnerable and socio-economically disadvantaged than others. Some had found work during class time and just listened to the session over their phones, some did not have reliable internet access or even a laptop to use at home, and some needed more support to maintain their physical and emotional well-being. In response to their concerns, I preferred to meet with the students over Zoom instead of writing long emails when I suspected that their psychological and emotional well-being was in question. I listened to these voices not as coming from the margins, but as ordinary humans who deserved empathy and solidarity during tumultuous times.

Dealing with the trajectory of the COVID-19 pandemic is like chasing a moving target. We have seen many predictions proven wrong and statistical models of infection rates and virus spread change drastically. Nobody knows what will happen in the next academic year. Many campuses may close again. I have attended and participated in webinars organized by Georgetown, Oxford, and University of Arizona on how to better handle the crisis. As I reflect on my personal experience, I find hope in adopting *resilient pedagogy* in language program direction and coordination. Josh Eycler, Director of Faculty Development and Thinkforward Quality Enhancement Plan at the University of Mississippi and Nick Swinehart at the University of Chicago Language Center, envision this as a future course design that is “modality agnostic.” Whether we are teaching in online, in-person, or blended environments, we are designing “one time and one time only.” However, there are still many remaining questions: How can we put a modality agnostic strategy into practice in an introductory course in a less commonly taught language with a non-Roman alphabet? How can we redesign the course materials and assessment activities to fit into multiple modalities? How can we address our students’ socioeconomic inequalities that the pandemic has revealed? It is imperative to find answers to these pressing questions and to be ready in case the pandemic lingers longer than foreseen!

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About the Author

Mahmoud Azaz is Associate Professor of Arabic Studies and SLA and Pedagogy at the University of Arizona (UA) where he coordinates the basic Arabic language program. He is the current Arabic Sector Head at the AAUSC and a Distinguished Fellow at the UA Center for University Education Scholarship.

E-mail: mazaz@arizona.edu