




## Toward systematic diversification of collegiate U.S. Arabic language curricula

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### Abstract

Growing recognition of the importance of instruction in colloquial Arabic has led to increased incorporation of colloquials into collegiate Arabic programs, whether taught separately from Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), or in an integrated fashion. Nevertheless, collegiate U.S. Arabic programs have, overall, not yet succeeded in foregrounding the Arab world's tremendously rich linguistic and cultural diversity. In many programs, both those that teach MSA and colloquial Arabic separately and those that follow an integrated approach, the lived experience of a great number of communities in the Arab world remains invisible.

This report examines how the push for colloquial instruction has inadvertently sustained the practices of erasure that increased instruction in informal Arabic had sought to address, and calls into question existing *center-versus-periphery* schemata that inform the work of Arabic curriculum designers. Instead, it proposes an approach to Arabic curriculum design that centralizes the Arab world's diversity and heterogeneity, rather than presenting it as a “tokenized side note” (Randall, 2017). This means offering alternatives to dominant narratives about Arab culture in the classroom and diversifying the Arabic colloquials taught. The report concludes with steps that Arabic program leaders, and curriculum and material designers, might take toward profound diversification of our Arabic curricula.

**Keywords:** *Teaching Arabic as a Foreign Language, diversification, decentering, colloquial Arabic, curriculum design*

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### Introduction

The Arabic language can be understood as a continuum of varieties that exist on a spectrum between a most formal and a least formal extreme. While all these varieties overlap to a large degree and much mixing occurs, simultaneously, the degree of formality of communicative situations favors specific varieties. While Classical Arabic, the most formal variety of the language, is primarily reserved for classical Arabic literature and scripture, Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) is today used in all parts of the Arab world largely for formal purposes that include much written communication, education, modern literature, and some formal spoken communication. It is MSA that for much of the twentieth century has been the instructional focus in collegiate U.S. Arabic programs, at the expense of the Arabic colloquials. Also often called dialects or vernaculars, the colloquials are varieties of the language that native speakers primarily use informally.<sup>1</sup> While colloquials vary based on factors that include locality, degree of urbanization, gender, religion, social class, and education level, in pedagogical settings their primary mode of categorization is geographical: they are identified with specific nation-states (Egyptian, Sudanese, Syrian, Moroccan Arabic and so on) or areas of the Middle East (North African, Levantine, Gulf Arabic).

Since the 1990s, the field of Teaching Arabic as a Foreign Language has seen growing recognition of the vital importance of instruction in colloquial Arabic. As a result, colloquials have increasingly been incorporated into collegiate Arabic programs, whether taught separately from MSA, or in an integrated fashion as exemplified in the instructional models of Belnap, Younes, Al-Batal, Featherstone, Shiri, and others (Al-Batal, 2018). The goal of these programs, regardless of how colloquials are taught in combination with MSA, is to increase students' proficiency not just in the variety of Arabic that is used for formal communication, but also in more informal, less high-brow Arabic.

Overwhelmingly, the primary Arabic colloquials that have been taught at collegiate Arabic-as-a-foreign language programs have been Egyptian Arabic and some form of Levantine Arabic: Syrian, Jordanian, Lebanese, or Palestinian. The choice for these colloquials was informed by beliefs about their intelligibility across the Arab world, in part due to exposure across the region to Egyptian and Syrian media—specifically cinema and TV series—and popular culture such as the work of iconic musicians. Additionally, for almost two decades, Cairo and Damascus were primary study-abroad destinations where many college-level learners of Arabic studied and, as such, could make significant strides in their mastery of these colloquials.

Inevitably, however, times change, and since about 2011, Cairo and Damascus have not been able to host many study-abroad learners, nor do Egyptian and Syrian film, television and music dominate the Arab entertainment industry to the same degree: The landscape of Arabic media and popular culture has become increasingly diverse. Native speakers' increased intercommunal engagement by means of the Internet, satellite television, and social media has been well-documented; similarly, learners of Arabic today have easier access to resources from different communities in the Arab world.

Yet, our Arabic programs have by and large continued to offer colloquial instruction primarily in Egyptian and Levantine, if we teach colloquials, and, accordingly, we have foregrounded the experiences of native speakers in Cairo and Damascus or Amman. The idea that the linguistic and cultural practices of communities in these urban centers are the most relevant for our students has led to the relative marginalization, in our field, of the linguistic and cultural practices, products and perspectives of communities elsewhere in the Arab world. That includes the lived experiences of hundreds of millions of people who live in other urban centers or in non-urban environments, as well as those who do not belong to dominant religious majorities or socio-economic elites in their own countries.

By means of example, in two widely used textbooks for first-year Arabic in higher education, the third edition of the *al-Kitaab* Part One textbook (Brustad et al., 2011) and Part One of the *'Arabiyyat al-Naas* series (Younes et al., 2014), mention of Arab country and capital names replaces treatment of the practices, products and perspectives of people living in these areas. For example, references to “Libya,” “Algeria,” “Sudan,” “Qatar,” or “Yemen” appear in an occasional Arabic sentence as the only way—or rather, not really a way—in which communities from these places appear in the book. Yemen, for example, appears in *al-Kitaab* Part One in two sentences that form part of exercises typically covered in second semester (Brustad et al., 2011): “Do you have any news from your family in Yemen?” (p. 223) and “Today I read in the Yemeni newspaper ‘al-Ayyam’ an excellent article about the Yemeni government’s new economic program” (p. 273). In the same textbook, videorecorded interviews with native speakers are limited to Egyptians; the only mosque described in the book is located in Cairo; and a practice sentence about Arabic literature refers to an award-winning Egyptian author: “The first book I read in Arabic was a story by Naguib Mahfouz” (Brustad et al., 2011, p. 247). To return to non-Egyptian/ non-Levantine country and capital names, in *'Arabiyyat al-Naas* they are part of reading practice in the introductory units, especially while students learn the alphabet. They become rare when that stage is passed. From then on, the book explicitly discusses only places located in the Levant or in Egypt (Younes et al., 2014).

The attention I draw to this issue should not be understood as a rejection of the overall merit of these textbooks. In fact, I use one of these textbook series in the program that I lead for several reasons. One is the strong proficiency results that can be achieved with the series. Additionally, the focus on material from Egypt and the Levant lends these books a certain structural coherence and may therefore have been done intentionally. However, I do not know of a single collegiate U.S. Arabic program that calls itself an

Egyptian or Syrian Studies Program—we all claim to focus on “the Arab world,” “the Middle East,” or “the Near East,” as a region. Yet we remain largely mute in our textbooks and our teaching, especially in first year, about the linguistic and cultural practices of a great many Arab communities. This is problematic for several reasons. First, both Arab instructors and heritage learners from places in the Arab world other than Egypt and the Levant do not see themselves represented or their experiences visualized. Second, by presenting Egyptian and Levantine as central in all meanings of the word (not just geographically in the center, but also central as essential for learning), we are in fact telling our students that there are certain places in the Arab world that are core, that should be the focus of our attention, that are the points of reference for our understanding of the entire Arab world, and there are other places and communities that are peripheral. Here I do not mean geographically peripheral—I mean peripheral in the sense that we are communicating to our students that it is acceptable to graduate from our programs without knowing anything, or more than just a kernel, about these places and these communities.

This messaging reinforces well-documented stereotypes and prejudices about the language and culture of various communities in the Middle East. For example, in their studies of language accommodation among native speakers of Arabic of different origins, Shiri (2002), Hachimi (2013), Chakrani (2015), and Soulaïmani (2019) have all documented the existence among native speakers of “ideological biases against Maghrebi [i.e., North African] Arabic, [which is] often characterized as both inauthentic and unintelligible” (Soulaïmani, 2019, p. 75). As these authors establish, such ideologies “reflect a long history of unequal power relations that are normally based on discourses of authenticity as well as purity” (Chakrani, 2015; Shiri, 2002; Hachimi, 2013, as cited in Soulaïmani, 2019, p. 76). According to Soulaïmani (2019), “in the Arabic context, Eastern dialects index social values of distinction and prestige whereas the Western ones are frequently criticized for mixing with French” (p. 76).

Chakrani (2015) pointed out that “attitudes toward a particular language or dialect are, in fact, attitudes toward its speakers” (p. 17), and that not just the Arabicness of North African colloquial is questioned but in fact “the Arabness of Maghrebi speakers” (p. 22). Soulaïmani (2019) has documented a phenomenon that most language educators are well aware of, namely that students often adopt the language attitudes of their teachers and articulate the same language ideologies they have heard expressed or seen enacted by us, including that North African dialects are unintelligible and difficult to learn, and that studying in North Africa may not help a learner of Arabic much. Similar stereotypes exist about studying abroad in the Arabian Peninsula region to improve one’s Arabic. According to Soulaïmani (2019), even a short study trip to Morocco confronts students with realities that enable them to question and abandon these negative attitudes.

Against prevailing stereotypes about the intelligibility of colloquials other than Egyptian and Levantine, Soliman (2014), and Trentman and Shiri (2020), among others, have demonstrated the significant degree of mutual intelligibility of various Arabic colloquials, both for native and non-native speakers. The point is one that can be expected: The prejudices that exist about speech communities outside of Egypt and the Levant are unfounded.

## Steps Forward

To avoid misinterpretations, let me first clearly state what I do not suggest we do. First, I do not suggest we abandon the teaching of Egyptian and Levantine Arabic linguaculture altogether. They remain useful and important as some of the many linguacultural practices of the Arab world. Also, Trentman (2011) has demonstrated that familiar colloquials can help students understand unfamiliar colloquials, so learners and instructors who know these colloquials are able to use them as a scaffold. I am not, in other words, advocating for the implementation of a different form of exclusionary teaching, but instead for greater inclusivity in our curricula. Second, although I will be addressing less commonly taught colloquials, I am not suggesting that all students study three, four, five, or even more Arabic colloquials in equal depth; since we have our learners with us for just a few years, that would not be feasible. What I am suggesting, instead, is a variety of measures taken both at the macro-level of curriculum design and at the micro-level of daily

instructional practice. These measures guide the ways in which I am rethinking and revising my own curriculum, which is a work in progress. For some of them, I draw inspiration from the principles of social justice pedagogy, especially those proposed by Glynn et al. (2018), and diversification work done in more commonly taught languages. These measures can be summarized as (a) offering alternatives to dominant or generalizing narratives about Arab culture and to harmful language ideologies, and (b) diversifying the Arabic colloquials that are taught.

## **Offering Alternative Narratives About Arab Culture and Colloquials**

### ***1. The systematic and consistent incorporation of audiovisual texts in different colloquials, of print texts as well as images from a wide variety of Arab communities, that address a broad range of practices, products and perspectives, issues, and trends.***

“Systematic” is key here, as incorporating one video per unit from a community that has been marginalized in the curriculum does not lead in to-depth student learning about that community; instead, it amounts to tokenization. Examples of such systematic content diversification require article-length descriptions that discuss a semester- or year-long curriculum. The idea here is of a threading of such diverse materials into the fabric of the curriculum as a whole. Taking a bird’s eye view, keeping track of the different contexts we incorporate in a spreadsheet (see also Miller, 2021, p. 92 on curricular maps) keeps our attention centered on who we are visualizing and who remains absent from our curriculum. It helps ensure that material from specific communities appears consistently. To illustrate, for the theme of “travel and exploration” we have access to content produced by a number of Arab travelers—not just Jordanian traveler/blogger Ibn Hattuta ([Ibn Hattuta Travels, n.d.](#)), but also Libyan traveler Rahalista ([رحاليسـتا Rahalista, n.d.](#)), Algerian traveler Khoubai ([Khoubai, n.d.](#)), Yemeni traveler Somaya Jamal ([سمية جمال بلقيس Somaya Jamal Balqees, n.d.](#)), and Kuwaiti traveler Anwar al-Juwaysri ([داھيه رحال, n.d.](#)), among others.<sup>2</sup> Many of these content producers maintain websites and social media accounts, as well as video collections on YouTube in different colloquials and sometimes even subtitled in colloquials. Needless to say, their material is rich in cultural content: for example, many of them have videos on Ramadan celebrations in different communities. These rich, diverse materials can be used not just for regular listening practice but for critical thinking activities and more sustained, project-based work that includes a focus on both the linguistic and cultural content. Because of the breadth of topics these content producers cover, their material is relevant to units beyond the one we might teach on travel.

As a micro-intervention, diversification appears pretty straightforward to incorporate into the images we use in our materials. Whether they are decorative images on our course websites, in the modules of our learning management systems, or on handouts, or informative images we use for conversation or discussion, mindfully and intentionally selecting images from different Arab communities can go some way, however small, in visualizing those communities and the environments in which they live and work. Online photo repositories such as [Unsplash](#) and [Flickr](#) allow us to source such images easily and without a major time investment.

### ***2. Providing sufficient background and contextualization for students to grapple with these materials with some nuance and depth.***<sup>3</sup>

I discuss an example of Suggestions 2 and 3 at the end of this section.

### ***3. Reflecting on and examining our own frames of reference as Arabic instructors, along with continued self-education on topics that are significant in communities with which we are not yet deeply familiar.***<sup>4</sup>

The latter often is necessary to be able to provide that contextualization I mentioned. However, since none of us can have equally rich expertise on what transpires in such a large and diverse region, to expect that we do this all work individually is also not realistic. Therefore, I add:

#### **4. Consulting colleagues from communities we want to include and drawing on their expertise.**

This can take the form of a reciprocal exchanging of questions about colloquial features, or about practices, products, or perspectives. Exchanging expertise can also take the form of inviting our colleagues to lead a workshop on our campus and doing the same for them. For example, a few times each year we offer an introductory workshop to a specific Arabic colloquial. Although I am not qualified to lead workshops on the North African colloquials, I certainly have colleagues who I can ask to share their expertise with us via Zoom, and I can do the same for them.

#### **5. Offering students assignments that consistently include connections to a wide variety of lesser-known Arab communities. Such assignments can include discovery activities followed by presentational writing or speaking; research students undertake in preparation for a class debate; or assignments that are part of semester-long project-based learning.**

As a basic example for the beginning level, rather than having students only read the one description of a Cairene mosque in the textbook, they can be assigned to find images of a place of worship from a Middle Eastern community (including Yazidi and Druze temples, synagogues, churches of different denominations, and mosques built in different architectural styles) and add their images to a shared slide deck. Students can prepare to share a few sentences about the images they found, teaching their peers two or three important words—words for the building itself, its shape or details, its environment, or the community that worships there. To return to Suggestion 2, as instructors we can then facilitate a class discussion about some of the symbols used by these faith communities, or the ways in which the natural environment influences choices for specific building materials or architectural styles.

Also, in my advanced-level classes, students complete such discovery assignments followed by presentational speaking, and I consistently guide students toward communities and places with which they may be less familiar by providing them with a list of options. For example, when students research major public health challenges in an Arab country, I suggest they focus their work on Sudan, Algeria, Yemen, and Iraq.

It is vitally important, in an assignment such as this, to include a focus on local organizations that work to address these challenges and for this assignment not to be students' only encounter with people or communities from these places. For example, in students' portfolio project for the Advanced I course, each week they explore the work of an Arab artist of their choice from a resource list and then reflect on their engagement with that work. I include a variety of artists from Sudan, Algeria, Yemen, and Iraq in addition to other places and communities in the Arab world. Similarly, for students' portfolio project in the Advanced II course, for which they research a social justice issue and local advocacy/activism in an Arab community, I again provide a list of options that includes communities from those countries. The point is, again, a consistent threading of such opportunities for learning throughout the curriculum, not one-off encounters—and especially not a one-off encounter with a problem in a community without exploring the ways in which it is addressed locally.

#### **6. Prompting students to engage critically but constructively with material in our textbooks including cultural blurbs or images that might generalize Arab experiences and, however well-intentioned, erase or obscure the experiences of some.**

Glynn et al. (2018) offer examples for working with cultural blurbs that include pairing the blurbs with probing questions that encourage students to critically examine their content and purported scope.

For example, in first-year Arabic courses, students often encounter Arab foods with which they likely are already familiar: hummus, shawarma, tabbouleh. Students may not realize that restaurant menus reproduced in Arabic textbooks for beginners often focus on such items because the words “hummus,” “shawarma,” and “tabbouleh,” and what they stand for, are easily recognizable by beginners. Explaining this to students

and offering them opportunities to explore some of the great variety within Middle Eastern cuisines helps them avoid overgeneralizing about Arab foods. If these were the only Arab foods we highlighted throughout our Arabic sequence, our approach would be reductionist. It would give students a poor idea of what people in many Arab communities typically cook and consume, and what ingredients are prevalent in those communities. Cuisine in itself is a theme that could fill not just a unit but a course, but even within set curricula that do not leave much space to explore this theme, a restaurant activity spanning a few class periods can broaden students' horizons. Students can research some of the common meals in a number of different Arab countries—from Libya to Mauritania and Djibouti to Yemen. They can then draw up a menu of weekly specials based on the cuisine they researched and promote their menus to the class the way servers in tourist areas will do streetside. At higher levels, in units around cuisine that involve more detailed attention to the steps involved in meal preparation, students can work with videos that focus on dishes from different Arab communities. Examples include this interview with a Yemeni restaurateur in the U.S. ([Aljazeera Mubasher, 2020](#)), a discussion of Djiboutian cuisine ([Shabakat al-Majd, 2020](#)), and a video on Mauritanian cuisine produced for Moroccan television (MEDI1 TV, n.d.).

***7. Intentionally offering content that may be reflective of stereotypes or may result in students articulating some of those stereotypes, along with class work and assignments designed specifically to problematize those stereotypes.***

As Randall (2017) has pointed out, students will not learn to recognize, reflect upon, and critique stereotypes if we do not give them an opportunity to hone these skills.

***8. Carving out class time to address any stereotypes and generalizations that we, as teachers, might hear students articulate.***

The following is an example from my advanced-level unit on health care. In that unit, I use a text that discusses how various Arab and non-Arab states rank globally in terms of incidence of diabetes. The text draws particular attention to the fact that in the states of the Arabian Peninsula, diabetes rates have been very high, and it connects the issue to the influx of oil wealth. Although the text itself does not do a great job in offering the historical contextualization for which I advocate under Suggestion 2, it does serve as a useful springboard for student investigations into causes for the high rates of diabetes and a class discussion that critically examines speculations students might make about such causes. As the instructor, I can do a better job guiding the discussion away from generalizing and stereotyping assumptions about the omnipresence and consequences of wealth in the Arabian Peninsula if I explore scholarship to educate myself on the history of urban planning in that region.

In the next section, I address the teaching of colloquials, and specifically the importance of diversifying the Arabic colloquials we teach. That work hinges on our ability to develop curriculum for less commonly taught colloquials.

### **Diversifying Arabic Colloquial Instruction**

The suggestions I have made so far include the systematic, consistent incorporation of audiovisual material presented in a variety of different colloquials. Presumably, this forms a part of the multidialectal approach for which Trentman and Shiri (2020) advocate, and of Soliman's variationist approach (forthcoming). We have valuable resources that can help us do this, one of them being [Playaling](#), a free-for-use website that hosts upwards of 1200 video clips, primarily drawn from YouTube.<sup>5</sup> Almost all of these clips are authentic content created for native speakers about a wide range of topics in different Arabic colloquials. The platform includes collections of videos in North African colloquials, in Gulf Arabic, and a few in Iraqi, Sudanese, and Yemeni.

However, during a conversation with the founder of Playaling, Jordan Gerstler-Holton, we discussed why it is that despite this rich colloquial diversity, by far the most widely used collections are those for Levantine, Modern Standard, and Egyptian Arabic. In fact, at the time of writing, of the 110 most widely used videos on the site, 50 are in Levantine, 24 in Egyptian, and 21 in Modern Standard, with an additional

12 videos spoken in a mix of these colloquials. Mr. Gerstler-Holton confirmed that current use of the site appears to follow what is primarily being taught, and that the availability of these high-quality videos in less commonly taught colloquials, even with useful transcription and English translation features, is not enough to get instructors or students to use them. It may be the case that instructors and learners who are unfamiliar with these less commonly taught colloquials would seek out videos in such colloquials more if they had access to course curricula of a certain comprehensiveness and reference works they can consult for lexical items or morphosyntactic features of the more unfamiliar colloquial. Such resources, of which we currently have so few, may help instructors and learners better understand the content and the language forms in videos spoken in less familiar colloquials. In other words, beyond multidialectal video resources, it appears we really need in-depth curriculum in the less commonly taught colloquials. Such curriculum also constitutes a valuable resource for any comparative dialectology courses Arabic programs consider offering in an attempt to increase students' ability to compare between different colloquials.

For a few years now, I have been thinking about design formats that simplify curriculum design for the less commonly taught colloquials and make it replicable. At the University of Minnesota, my colleagues and I designed a Gulf Arabic course in 2019 that we have now offered several times.<sup>6</sup> The term *Gulf*, a translation of the Arabic *khaliji*, here refers to the colloquials used in the coastal areas of the Arabian Peninsula, especially in Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and Oman.<sup>7</sup> We selected Gulf Arabic based on staff expertise in our program, and because it is one of those varieties of Arabic that is hardly ever taught in U.S. higher education, despite the obvious importance of the region as an integral part of the Arab world. The curriculum for the course is designed entirely online in a learning management system (LMS), specifically Canvas, and enables both in-person and online delivery of the course. Using a backward design approach, I first identified the learning outcomes for the course and designed an assessment model based on them. The actual units for the course are thematic, with each unit covering one to two weeks of instruction and corresponding with one module in the LMS. For each of these modules, we created a vocabulary list in Quizlet and used both authentic dialogues drawn from TV series and dialogues of our own design, which we recorded. In addition to using dialogues from TV series, a variety of songs, and a feature film, we drew authentic material for the modules from televised cooking shows, documentary programming, animated cartoons, and store and restaurant websites. In following a flipped model for the classroom, I created videos that walk students through pertinent grammar items prior to class, to allow for class time to be primarily devoted to practice. To ensure student engagement prior to class time, we made several videos interactive using H5P, a tool that allows instructors to insert various question types with immediate feedback into video material. When students watch interactive videos created with H5P in preparation for class, the video halts at specific points, students are presented with the instructor's question, and they receive immediate feedback on their response. This helps avoid superficial engagement with pre-class assignments and enables students to grapple more actively with new material. Additionally, students submitted assignments using VoiceThread, Flipgrid, and Google Forms.

As an example, I summarize here the unit that revolves around traffic and getting around. In this unit, students learn to give and follow directions and to accurately use the imperative in Gulf Arabic; they also explore issues related to road safety in the Arabian Peninsula. The unit follows our viewing of the Emirati film *City of Life* (Mostafa, 2009), which includes a plot line about an immigrant who works as a cab driver, and another about local youth who enjoy racing and performing stunts with their vehicles. In class, students start with comprehension work on a dialogue that involves a plan for an excursion, consideration of traffic conditions, and the best ways to avoid heavy traffic. Next, students practice the vocabulary and the imperative forms they have studied at home by giving each other directions to various places on our university campus, and, reading a map, from various points A to various points B in Abu Dhabi. Students read and watch a trio of short videos on the practice of drifting in the countries of the Arabian Peninsula. They post their thoughts on the practice in a discussion forum in the LMS. This is followed by a class discussion in which the instructor offers additional context for the practice, using insights from Pascal Menoret's work *Joyriding in Riyadh* (2014), among other sources. This discussion is then tied back to what students have viewed in *City of Life*.

There are advantages to building such a curriculum in an online form, even if the course is delivered in person. First, content items are easy to substitute: If a video becomes unavailable or a text begins to feel somewhat out of date, it is easy to remove and replace it with something else without students even noticing. Second, free-of-cost technologies can be fully integrated into the curriculum, and third, content can be made available free-of-cost under a Creative Commons license, removing barriers students might otherwise experience with pricey materials. This would also allow colleagues at other institutions to use such an online curriculum. Most importantly, though, the structure of one such course might serve as a blueprint for similar courses in other Arabic colloquials.

If we had a number of fully developed, accessible curricula for less commonly taught colloquials, how do I imagine they could be used? Some programs might choose to add them to their colloquial offerings to offer colloquials beyond Egyptian and/or Levantine in rotation. Other programs might choose to substitute some of the colloquial curricula they currently use. Some instructors might use these new curricula as resources for the implementation of a multidialectal approach. As such, I believe that the availability of these curricula constitutes a service to the field, regardless of whether they are used at all institutions to teach students. Additionally, one could imagine that learners exploring material, for example Playaling videos in unfamiliar colloquials, might similarly use such curricula as resources. Learners at places where such colloquials are not offered might even be able to take those courses remotely.

Regardless of the scenario, the importance of curriculum design for the less commonly taught colloquials cannot be overstated: It should be a core component of any sustained work in our field that aims to center the diversity of the Arab world.

## Conclusion

Osborn (2006) reminds us that “neutrality in knowledge production is largely a myth,” and that “some forms of knowledge are advanced whereas others are devalued” (p. 15). Accordingly, our choices to privilege the linguistic and cultural practices of Egypt and the Levant reinforce ideas about their primacy and perpetuate a myth about their generalizability. It is important for us to acknowledge and clearly enact for our students the understanding that the linguistic and cultural practices of all communities have equal intrinsic value, and that they also have their specificity. As long as the linguaculture of non-Egyptian, non-Levantine communities remains part of the “excluded curriculum” (Reagan & Osborn, 2021, p. 245), our students will engage in overgeneralization about the Arab world that we can, in fact, mitigate. While committing to centering variation and diversity enables us to validate the lived experience of more people, it also has real, practical benefits. For the advocates of a multidialectal/variationist approach to the teaching of Arabic, the goal is to better equip students to navigate interactions in the many different colloquials and mixed forms of Arabic they will encounter during their lives. Similarly, centering cultural diversity will enable our learners to interact more meaningfully and appropriately with others from a broad variety of backgrounds.

## Notes

1. The idea that colloquials would be reserved for spoken, and MSA for written communication, has proven inaccurate. To give just a few examples, song lyrics, graffiti, and protest signs come in MSA as well as colloquials; both appear in speeches, television talk shows, and commercials; the news is often presented in MSA; and texting, tweeting, and online chatting is often done in colloquials. The degree to which colloquials versus MSA are favored for specific communicative situations also differs from one area of the Arab world to the next.
2. YouTuber Alaa Alshaer lists ten of them in one of his videos ([Alaa Alshaer, 2021](#)). It is important to note that even though some of the examples I offer in this report might appear to focus on geographic diversity, the diversification for which I advocate is not just about incorporating material



- from different Arab countries. It includes diversity in terms of language use, religion, race/ethnicity, socio-economic status, age, gender and sexual orientation, and physical ability.
3. For Hackman (2005), “a thorough understanding of the historical context of all classroom content is vital for students to construct an analytical lens” (p. 105).
  4. Glynn et al. (2018) present teachers’ exploration of their own frames of reference as essential work to be done as part of a social justice approach to language teaching, as such self-reflective practice supports teachers’ ability to meaningfully work with the multicultural dynamics of the classroom.
  5. As video clips are regularly added to the Playalng website, their number continues to increase.
  6. I thank Husain Al Ahabbi, Emily Sumner, Nasr Abdo, Rawan Algahtani, and Ally Kann for their contributions to this project, as well as the students in the first iteration of the course for their plentiful feedback.
  7. The differences between the colloquials of these coastal areas, the Saudi Arabian inland, and Yemen can be considered minor. The same applies to the colloquial differences that exist in the Arabian Peninsula along various other fault lines (e.g., religious denomination).

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