

Al-Maqha: A Low-Tech Web Café for Foreign Language Learners

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Arabic has become an important foreign language in many European and American universities. The number of students has grown steadily over the last decade, and though the September 11th attack undoubtedly had an impact on university students' interests in Middle Eastern studies in general, the interest in learning Arabic as a foreign language began well before that: Recent figures from American universities show an increase of 92.5% between 1998 and 2002 – from 5505 to 10596 students (Allen, 2004, p. 275) – and a similar development has taken place in Europe. Among the foreign language studies at University of Southern Denmark, Arabic is now second only to English when it comes to numbers of students, and languages like German, French and Spanish, which traditionally played a major role until the mid 1990s, only attract about half of the number of students studying Arabic today.

The growing number of students who want to study Arabic as a foreign language is most probably due to the ongoing cultural and economic globalization: Europe and the US have many Arab immigrants, oil is still an important resource world wide, and political factors such as the war in Iraq and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict add to the media's coverage of the region. And there are reasons to believe that in the future, the trend of globalization will also have an impact on the teaching of other foreign languages which traditionally have not been high on the university agenda in Europe and the US: Languages such as Chinese and Japanese – and maybe Russian in a more distant future – stand good chances to follow a similar trend, since these cultures are very much in focus in the West, politically as well as economically.

The changing profile of the body of foreign language learners in Western universities requires new teaching and learning material, not only because the focus on new foreign languages makes this need imperative, but also because today's foreign language students have grown up with ICT and the Internet as an integrated part of their daily life. The

students expect these media to be included in their language learning, if they are to keep up motivation and acquire the skills needed in order to interact in communicative situations of today. In our case, as teachers and researchers of Arabic as a foreign language, we had to deal with this pressure for innovative materials over the last decade, and one new way to meet this challenge was to create a web café, *al-Maqha*, for our students to use outside the classroom. *Al-Maqha*, which will be presented below, is made for Danish learners of Arabic as a foreign language, but the principles, the pedagogical approach and the fact that it is a low-tech solution and therefore not technically difficult to create, may well make the café interesting for other foreign language teachers, whether they teach, for example, French learners of Russian, Japanese learners of German, or English learners of Swahili. The pedagogical approach used for *al-Maqha* is, in other words, language and learner independent.

In what follows, we shall first explain the purpose and the principles behind *al-Maqha*. Secondly, we shall give an introduction to the café and how language learners can use it, and finally we will relate how the café was actually used by our language learners. This will include some remarks on the shortcomings which we have found during our evaluation of the project, and perspectives on what could be done to overcome these shortcomings so as to expand the number of users.

***Al-Maqha*: Background, purpose and principles**

Al-Maqha means café in Arabic. This term has been chosen because “café” has very positive connotations, be it in the Arab world or in Europe, or for that matter in most other parts of the world. A café conveys the notion of a meeting place, a place to relax, to read a newspaper or to sit and chat with friends or discuss more serious matters. It also conveys the notion of not being at work, that is, the freedom to choose how to spend your time and with whom. In other words, when we go to a café, we want to relax, read, listen to music, meet others, socialize and communicate in what is expected to be a nice and relaxed atmosphere. And this is exactly what we want our language learners to experience when they visit our web café *al-Maqha* on the web.

At present, *al-Maqha* targets the learners of Arabic at our faculty. They study Arabic for communicative purposes, and in this respect, our approach differs from the one implemented at most other European universities where the focus of Arabic studies is still on reading skills and linguistic issues, or what is often termed “philology”. With the growing number of students, we have succeeded in diversifying the programs we offer: Some of our students study for a combined Bachelor’s or Master’s degree of either Arabic and Economics or Arabic and Communication, while others join our Open University program which takes place during weekends. Still, what all students have in common across curricula, differences in age, proficiency and professional or personal interests in Arabic, is that they expect to learn to communicate in the foreign language, and they expect teaching materials to show aspects of the modern Arab world.

Teaching Arabic for communication may seem obvious and easy to deal with for teachers of English or other more commonly taught foreign languages, but in the context of Arabic, this is a serious challenge: Not only is there a general lack of qualified teachers; we also lack suitable teaching materials in Arabic for communication on a world wide level. New material is slowly beginning to appear, but with a few exceptions, most material still tends to be

old fashioned and outdated, whether we consider it from the point of view of form, content or pedagogical approach.

The growing number of students, the general lack of qualified teachers and the absence of suitable teaching materials for communication have put serious pressure on our staff and on our program in general. And it is in this context that we invented the web café. Thus, the café was intended to help us handle two important aspects of the situation:

- It should create a common learning space outside the classroom for students across curricula, so as to provide them with the opportunity to communicate in Arabic, be it with peers, teachers or Arab native speakers. The learning space should also give easy access to all sorts of Arabic materials, be it fashion magazines, newspapers, radio and television programs, shopping areas, travel agencies, etc. - the purpose being to meet students' expectations and thus keep up their motivation for learning Arabic.
- *Al-Maqha* should allow the staff to pool teaching resources, especially those available on the Internet, so as to make it easier to organize classes, prepare student tasks and homework and get easy access to new material. The platform should also be a central resource to which teachers could refer students, thus offering the possibility to diversify classroom teaching according to the different levels of the language learners, without putting an additional pressure on the teacher. In short, *al-Maqha* should help teachers prepare classes more easily, exchange new ideas, and inspire each other, thereby reducing some of the workload.

Consequently, the web café had to take the following principles into consideration. It should:

- Be clearly learner-centred
- Cover the four skills of speaking, listening, reading and writing
- Use all possible means to replace the traditional educational context of language learning with an informal and relaxed atmosphere which would eventually lower language learner anxiety
- Be as flexible as possible, so that language learners can use it for their own purpose, be it individually, in pairs, in groups or in open forums
- Offer as many interactive features as possible within the frame of available technology so as to support communication among users
- Offer support for language production in forms of dictionaries, encyclopaedia, corpora, grammars, etc.
- And, very importantly, be low-tech in order not to burden the staff more than they already are

In order to meet the last requirement, the café was constructed in the framework of Blackboard, which is the e-learning system used at our university. Within this frame, communication tools are easily accessible, maintenance of links is simple, and it is easy to track and get a statistical overview of individual students' use of the different features within the café

The Nine Rooms

Al-Maqha has been shaped according to the above-mentioned requirements. Also, in order to make the café more tangible to the learners, we have added “a physical flavour” to the web café in the sense that we have divided it into nine different rooms, each having its own specific purpose. The learner gets access to the rooms by using a menu offering the following entries:

- the meeting place
- the playroom
- the calligrapher’s room
- *Sawt al-Arab* – “the Arab voice”
- readers’ corner
- the information desk
- the suq – “market”
- the travel agency
- the student affairs office

Besides these “rooms”, the menu gives access to a list of FAQ’s about using *Al-Maqha* and Blackboard, and about the use of computers in Arabic in general.

In each room, a wide range of tools are available and ready to use. With Unicode now being standard in all Windows applications and loudspeakers being close to standard equipment, most computer users today are able to read and write in any writing system and listen to sound files on the web. In addition to these features, we have added tools which allow students to communicate orally: By using the voice tool of *Wimba* as a building block within Blackboard, students can send voice mails, they can chat orally as well as in writing, and they can make oral as well as written announcements and put them on a billboard. These features are available in most rooms of the café - users should look for three easily distinguishable orange icons in each room, as shown in Figure 1.



Figure 1. Voice tools

The meeting place is the first room which language learners are expected to visit. This room can be compared to the café counter or the bar in real life cafes where people meet to buy a drink, bump into each other, exchange news, etc. The meeting place in *al-Maqha* has several features which all aim at making visitors communicate with each other: The language learner has access to voice chat, e-mails (voice or written) and a bill board where they can put up a (voice or written) introduction of themselves and check who is currently present in the cafe. The meeting place is also the entry to the students' individual web pages within Blackboard, which the students are encouraged to make in Arabic. Figure 2 shows an example of such a student web page.

Homepage: Maria Kyung Overgaard

Introduction

انا اسمي ماريا وانا دنماركية من اصل كوري. سكنت في الدنمارك منذ 1974 في اسرة دنماركية ولتلك انا لا اعرف اى شء عن ثقافتهم كوريا او اللغة الكورية! درست اللغة العربية سنتين فقط لكننى اتمنى اننى املك شعرهنى بقراء عن عسى وحياتى مايرغب من ان حصلت على الماجستير فى التاريخ و اللغة اللغوية القديمة فلم استطيع ان اجد وظيفة مناسبة. لذا بدأت درسة اللغة العربية. لست طالبة جيدة لكننى احب القوافى العري (II) والسفر الى البلدان فى الشرق الاوسط. احمل الآن مركز الشرق الاوسط فى الجامعة الدنماركية الجنوبية وانا ساعده المصحح يعنى اصل بالمتابع استوعبه متعلقة الى اللغة العربية



Personal Information

بلغت فى مدينة "قلبي" مع والد والذني. أحياناً الأطفال الآخرون علموا معنا، لانهم كانوا غير قادرين أن يعيشوا مع عائلاتهم. تعتبر ثلاثة منهم أنا لتكون اخواني و اخوتي. احب اصغر ولد جدًا. هويام من العمر 23 سنة الآن ويعيش مع صديقته قرب ابائى. الغنمىل منزول ولديه أطفال. أنا لا أزوج (بعد) لكن هذا عادى جدًا فى الدنمارك | ليس لدى أى أطفال. لكن لدى قط. أحيى فى شقة فردياً من مركز المدينة. لكن قلبى يعد عن عسى. لا أحب عندما يسطر. ألتصق أركب دراجتى حينما أذهب. أحب قراءة الكتب عن البلاد الأخرى. تاريخهم القديم بخاصة - الأفضل عندما يكونى لمرارة تلك البلاد وليس فقط لبراً. أعجب لكى ليس لدى مال كافى لفتح تلك | احب جدًا أن أشاهد الأفلام - "كنون", "سيس فيكتون" وما يسسى بالأفلام الفكرية - لكننى لا أجد أفلام الكوميديا لكنى مفضل

Figure 2. A student web page

The playroom gives access to Arabic quizzes, puzzles and games available on the web, some of which have been created by our staff. They cover different areas, from alphabet songs, vowelization puzzles and grammar quizzes to Hangman exercises (vocabulary) and trivia (knowledge based tests). In order to guide the users, links are tentatively ranked from easier to more difficult. The important message conveyed to the users is that learning Arabic can be fun and that playing is an integrated part of foreign language learning. Figure 3 and 4 show some very different examples of what to find in the playroom.

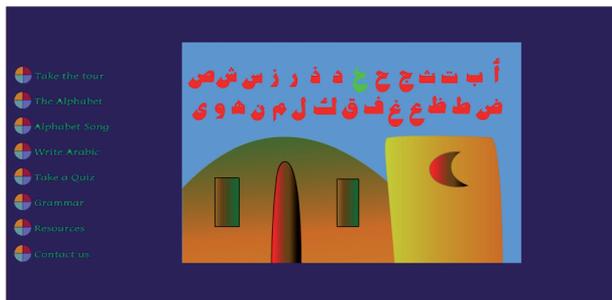


Figure 3. An alphabet song available on the Internet (<http://www.funwitharabic.com/song.htm>)



Figure 4. Example of a simple grammar quiz created by our staff in Hot Potatoes.

The *Calligrapher's Room* is the place for learners to develop their writing skills. In this room, they can access e-mail, Arabic blogs, lists of pen pals and instructions for reading and writing calligraphy, which is a highly developed skill in Arab and Muslim culture. One important feature created by the staff is the writing exercises which introduce language learners to different ways of writing formal and informal e-mails, letters, job applications, personal advertisements, web pages, love letters etc. Figure 5 shows an example of such a template for a love letter – with just the right idiomatic constructions of expressing warm feelings.



Figure 5. Template of an Arabic love letter available in the Calligrapher's Room

Sawt al-Arab – meaning “The Arab voice” – is a term adapted from a famous radio station created by the Egyptian president Jamal Abd al-Nasser in the 1960s. In this room, language learners get access to “The Jukebox”, where they can listen to and purchase Arab music and find the lyrics of their favourite songs. They can also access Arabic radio- and television channels as well as films and videos. In addition to these media – all made for Arab native speakers – the “Sawt al-Arab”-room gives access to educational programs and software made for language learners. The pedagogical focus is on listening comprehension - a skill which many language learners of Arabic struggle with for years before they feel comfortable with it. The immersion of language learners into the media flow for Arab native speakers intends to make learners more comfortable with listening to Arabic and to pave the way for a shift of focus from what they do not understand to the bits and pieces which they actually do comprehend. Finally, the room is linked up to chat rooms about films and music within *Yahoo!*

Readers' corner is the place to find all kinds of Arabic texts, from children's books to teenagers fashion magazines to daily and weekly newspapers, journals and other types of web-based reading materials. The room gives access to relevant libraries and dictionaries, which may be of help to students looking for support or new reading material in Arabic.

The information desk is a pool of links to resources about Arabic or the Arab world – but not necessarily written in Arabic. Here students can get access to libraries, databases and search engines, encyclopaedias, dictionaries, Internet portals related to the Middle East, and other relevant information sites related to religion, politics, geography, economics etc. of the Arab and Middle Eastern region.

The Suq is essentially the market place. Here students can find an organized collection of links to all kinds of Arabic-related shopping sites on the Internet. An example of such a site is shown in Figure 6.



Figure 6. Example of an Arabic-related shopping site accessible for the Suq (<http://hijabclothing.com>)

At *The travel agency* students can get a variety of information related to studying Arabic abroad. As all students except those studying at the Open University have to spend their third study year at a university in the Arab world, this room is extremely relevant for most students. Here they can find links to the institutions with which we have already established contact about offering a program suitable to our students, or they can browse for other schools if they want to make a plan on their own for their year abroad. They can also find links to summer school all over the Middle East, and find other students' reviews of the different schools and universities, they have visited in the past. They can find general travel information and get in touch with the international office at our university as well. In addition to all this, students who are not obliged to go abroad – and who prefer to travel and study in cyberspace only – can find on-line courses of Arabic.

At *the student affairs office*, all kinds of formal information about Arabic studies is available. Here students can find information about where and when teaching takes place, when and how to register for their exams, and when and how to turn in home assignments. They can also find general student guidelines and rules regulating their study and university activities in general, as well as technical advice on using the e-learn system. Additionally, they can find a list of whom to contact for getting support on any question they may have.

To sum up, two things should be clear from this brief presentation of *al-Maqha*. First, from a communication point of view, the web café covers three important domains which are useful for foreign language learners:

- Internal communication: It allows students, teachers and administrators from our university to communicate with each other across curricula
- External communication: It allows our students to establish relations to the world surrounding their Arabic studies, such as, for example, American or Japanese students of Arabic, Arab native speakers, language schools and Universities in the Arab world, shopkeepers, etc. – all in Arabic.
- Information gathering: It allows easy access to different tools such as dictionaries, encyclopaedia, news, films, books, games, etc. – materials which support language learning and which are of interest to students and teachers.

Secondly, *al-Maqha* is mainly a collection of tools, from traditional mail to voice mail and chat rooms, as well as a large collection of links. Apart from the use of oral software, in this case *Wimba*, these are all very basic features on the web which most users have access to and know how to use. For this reason, we consider *al-Maqha* to be a low-tech solution: There is no need to buy new software, learn to use new technical devices, etc. What makes the café interesting to learners is that links related to the Arabic language and the Arab world are collected and organized within a comprehensible framework which makes access much simpler and the different possibilities easier to grasp for students learning Arabic as a foreign language.

Evaluation and use of *al-Maqha*

In our student evaluation of the web café, all learners say they are happy with the tools it provides. But how do they actually use it – if at all? And if they use it, do they do so in the way we want them to? Such questions are inevitable when evaluating the café from a pedagogical perspective.

From the Blackboard tracking system, a statistical overview of the use of the café was extracted about a month and a half after the opening. The total number of students registered was 125. As shown in Figure 7, the most popular rooms seem to be the *play room*, the *meeting place* and the *information desk*. *Sawt al-arab* was in extensive use during a limited period when one teacher used it as an integrated part of her teaching, but only a few students seem to use it a lot on their own. *The students' affairs office* was primarily visited around the time when the students were to register for their exams.

"Room"	Hits	Percent
Information desk	1083	13%
Reading corner	615	7%
Play room	1387	16%
More links	717	8%
Sawt al-Arab	996	12%
Calligrapher	590	7%
HELP!	187	2%
Suq - Market	496	6%
Meeting place	1022	12%
Al-Maqha	605	7%
Student affairs	104	1%
Travel agency	764	9%
Total	8566	100%

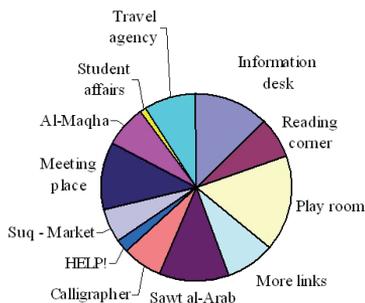


Figure 7. Statistics of students' use of the Arabic Webcafé from the opening on March 5th to May 25th 2005

From the statistical overview of the individual students' use, it appears that they have different ways of using the café. Very few students use all facilities frequently. Some do not use the web café at all, but among the frequent users, many have one or two "favourite rooms", while they are not paying much attention to the others. Based on this, we could define three types of users.

The browsing user: Some users are almost exclusively using the features which allow them to do "guided shopping" on the Internet. Either on websites related to the Arab world (news, music, etc.) or they do genuine shopping on sites promoting Islamic dress, jewellery, etc. What is interesting about these users is that they do not use the core tools of the web café, that is, tools for developing language skills or seeking information related to their studies. But it seems as if they find the lists of links which the web café provides useful, and by using these links, they get in touch with Arabic language and culture.

The information seeking user: These users are using the café almost exclusively for administrative matters: They seek information about how to register for their exam, how to setup their computer to write in Arabic, or they seek information about language schools abroad. Accordingly, their use is more or less limited to periods, where they need to get this kind of information, e.g. around the time they have to register for exams or when they are planning their study year abroad. The positive aspect here is that these students make use of the

café to find the information they need on their own, instead of contacting the teacher or a secretary at the university. And with time, this could actually result in a substantial ease of workload for the staff. Of course, the less positive aspect is that these students are not inspired to try out the other language-related tools included in the café which could help them develop their communication skills in Arabic.

The eager-to-learn user: This is the kind of usage the web café is primarily designed to promote. A limited number of students are frequent users of the language developing features. They check in on the meeting site to get in touch with other users and train their oral language skills, and they use the playroom facilities to develop their language and grammar knowledge.

We would like to have more *eager-to-use learners* and one way to get them, we think, will be to integrate the tools available in the web café in the classroom so as to familiarize the students with the tools and how to use them. Despite the low-tech solution, some students seem to be scared off by parts of the technology: One of the major barriers has shown to be the use of oral communication tools – voice mail, voice chat etc. Some students are basically unfamiliar with, or even afraid of, the headset and are therefore reluctant to use the café to interact orally with their peers. Another obstacle is of the opposite nature: Some students are very familiar with the different communication tools provided by the web, and therefore tend to prefer other available tools outside the Blackboard frame, because these are more advanced and sophisticated. For instance, some prefer to use msn.com or yahoo.com instead of the mail or chat features offered by Blackboard because they get a message when others log onto their computer; they can also use the web-cam etc. Yet others prefer to use the interactive tools in Blackboard within their own course instead of through the web café, simply because it is more private, as only students from their own class can enter and follow what is going on.

The web café is open to guest visitors, but during the test phase, we had practically no visitors. This was surprising, as we made much publicity around the opening of the café, but we suspect it to be due to the “closed frame” provided by Blackboard: The café lies deep down in a hierarchy of learning sites on the university’s own platform, and is thus complicated to enter from the outside. This lack of guest visitors is a problem in the sense that we would like our students to get in touch with Arabic learners outside our university, and later on, with native speakers.

Conclusion: Who benefits?

From the teachers’ perspective it is highly interesting to evaluate who actually benefits from the web café in terms of language acquisition. From the above mentioned statistical overview of the individual use, it is clear that the students, who use and benefit most from the web café, are primarily users who are already doing well in their acquisition of Arabic. They are independent learners in the sense that they do not rely heavily on teachers’ instruction, and they often use much time on homework. For these students the café is a motivating factor, which supports their acquisition and the communication with their peers. The weaker students, on the other hand, do not use the core facilities to acquire more language; they may use the student affairs’ office, which reduces workload on teachers and office staff, or they might do some browsing on the easily accessible sites of the café, which

is positive because they get cultural input during these activities. However, they do not use the communicative and linguistic facilities, which could help them more substantially in developing their language skills in Arabic.

Thus, unfortunately, the café seems to actually increase the gap between stronger and weaker learners. The solution to this problem is to integrate the use of the café in the classroom in order to familiarize students with the facilities and then step by step make them work more independently. This would also be the solution to the problems related to the technology barriers mentioned above. Hopefully, once a certain degree of familiarity with the different tools is established in class, more students will be willing to spend time using the web café on their own outside the classroom.

The lack of guest visitors is primarily perceived as a problem because such visitors could lead to more authentic communication with students from outside and with native speakers. In order to meet this challenge, a next step could be to translate *Al-Maqha* into English and putting it in an open forum on the Internet. This could bring Arabic students together – not only from different universities in Denmark, but from all over the world. An additional advantage of leaving the Blackboard framework would be to link up to interactive tools with more advanced features which some students already use when interacting on the Internet.

Reference

Allen, R. (2004). Perspectives on Arabic teaching and learning. *Modern Language Journal*, 88(2), 275-278.