Research article
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A parallel text-based approach for teaching Standard and Vernacular Arabic

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Abstract: This article describes a novel approach for combining the teaching of Standard Arabic (SA) and Vernacular Arabic (VA) developed at the University of Gothenburg. This approach (Parallel Text-based Approach, or PTA) is characterized by two features: a) VA and SA are taught in separate parallel courses, and b) instruction in VA is based on transcribed dialogues. These features go against common recommendations in the literature, in particular those of the influential so-called integrated approach. Drawing on the concept of communicative competence, it is argued that both of these practices have significant pedagogical benefits that have been neglected in the literature. For example, the teaching SA and VA in separate courses provides for a structured way of exploiting the linguistic overlap between the two varieties and makes possible the allocation of specialized teacher resources. Basing the instruction of VA on transcribed dialogues facilitates classroom discussion of sociolinguistic and pragmatic features and makes linguistic features in VA more discoverable to students than is the case when they are only presented aurally. This approach may be an attractive alternative to the integrated approach for program developers seeking to add instruction in VA to an existing Arabic program.

Keywords: Arabic, diglossia, integrated approach, teaching Arabic as a foreign language (TAFL)

Introduction
Arabic is famously characterized by diglossia (Ferguson 1959, 1996), in that a local variety of Vernacular Arabic (VA, ʿāmmiyya) is learned as the first language in childhood and used for informal oral interaction, while Standard Arabic (SA, fuṣḥā), a variety that is standardized throughout the Arabic speaking region, is learned as a second language in formal education and is used in most written contexts. Traditionally, the teaching of Arabic as a foreign language has focused on SA, with students often left to themselves to acquire some variety of VA, for example during studies abroad. This is now changing with a growing consensus among teachers that students are best served by learning a variety of VA from the early introductory level (Al-Batal 2018a; Nielsen 1996; Palmer 2007; Ryding 2006; Wahba 2006; Wilmsen 2006).1 However, there is a reluctance among many teachers and institutions to teach VA (Abdalla and Al-Batal 2011: 16; Younes and Huntley 2019: 289). There may be many reasons for this reluctance, including ideological resistance, time constraints, VA not being a standardized language, lack of experience in teaching VA, lack of teaching materials and methods, unwillingness to give up established teaching practices, and the worry that students will be confused by the multitude of linguistic forms. Institutions that do teach VA from the early level do so in a variety of ways, differing in the class time allotted to the two varieties, in whether they are taught simultaneously or else in what order, and in whether they are divided into separate courses (Al-Batal 2018b). We may thus characterize the current era of university-level teaching of VA as one of experimentation. It is

1 For opposing views, see Eisele (2018) and Alhawary (2013, 2021).

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against this background that this paper presents a novel *parallel text-based approach* (PTA) for teaching VA, developed by the author at the University of Gothenburg (UG). This approach addresses several reasons for the reluctance mentioned above by providing a way of grafting instruction of VA on to an existing SA course, using transcripts of dialogue to enhance both grammatical and cultural competence (Canale and Swain 1980) in VA. The aim of this paper is to describe this approach and how it is manifested in concrete teaching practices, and to discuss its potential advantages and disadvantages, presenting the field with an approach to teaching VA in conjunction with SA that may be attractive to Arabic program developers.

The description of PTA as *parallel* and *text-based* highlights its two main features: that VA is taught separately but in parallel and in close coordination with instruction in SA, and that written transcripts of dialogues form the basis of VA teaching. Both these features go against practices often recommended in the literature on the teaching of Arabic as a foreign language, and the bulk of this paper is therefore concerned with discussing advantages of these features. To frame this discussion, PTA will be contrasted with two highly influential approaches for teaching VA, the first developed by Younes and his colleagues (Younes 1990, 2006, 2015, 2018; Younes and Huntley 2019) and represented by the textbook *ʿArabiyyat al-Naas* (Younes, Weatherspoon and Foster 2014), and the second developed by Al-Batal (1992) and his colleagues and represented by the textbook *Al-Kitaab fī taʿallum al-ʿarabiyya* (Brustad, Al-Batal and al-Tunsi 2011). While not identical, these methodologies share important underlying principles that contrast with PTA. For the purposes of this article, the term *integrated approach*, although only used specifically by Younes to describe his approach, will here be used collectively for both these approaches.

The rest of this article is organized as follows. First, the concepts of communicative competence and the communicative approaches to language teaching as they apply to Arabic are discussed, as is the central problem of ‘confusion’ in simultaneously teaching and learning VA and SA. Thereafter, two foundational principles of the integrated approach that contrast with PTA are described. The focus then moves to PTA itself, first presenting how it is applied practically at UG and then discussing the pedagogical advantages of this approach. The final section presents concluding remarks.

**The communicative approach in Arabic teaching**

Communicative approaches to language teaching are characterized by taking the functions for which language is used, rather than linguistic form, as the organizing principle for teaching. These approaches began to be developed in the 70s, inspired by Hymes’ (1972) concept of *communicative competence* and as a reaction to the grammar-translation and audio-lingual approaches popular at the time (Savignon 2017). Canale and Swain (1980), synthesizing previous theoretical work, describe communicative competence as consisting of three components: *grammatical, sociolinguistic,* and *strategic competence*. *Grammatical competence* is the ability to form grammatically correct sentences. *Sociolinguistic competence* is the ability to follow sociocultural rules, such as using the appropriate register and forms for different situations and interpreting forms for social meaning. *Strategic competence* is the ability to deal with obstacles to communication resulting from deficiencies in the other competences, for example by dealing with one’s own performance errors (false starts, hesitations, etc.), paraphrasing to avoid using forms not yet mastered, or asking for reformulations or clarification from the interlocutor. Canale and Swain (1980: 28) stress that these competences are of equal impor-

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2 PTA has similarities to the approach developed at the University in Arizona (Shiri and Joukhadar 2018), in that both divide instruction in SA and VA into separate, parallel courses, but they differ in two important respects. The first is that the Arizona approach aims for students to attain equal levels of oral proficiency in SA and VA (Shiri and Joukhadar 2018: 158) while in PTA students are only trained in oral proficiency in VA in the first semester. The second is that the Arizona model avoids presenting students with VA in writing (Shiri and Joukhadar 2018: 161), while this is one of the core features of PTA.
tance and that they require explicit meta-linguistic instruction. Traditionally, language teaching has focused almost exclusively on grammatical competence, while communicative approaches seek to train students in all three competences.

The importance of teaching sociolinguistic competence arguably increases with the cultural distance from the target language, since the learner’s preexisting social competence for these languages is less reliable. Furthermore, as Davies (1987: 76) notes, sociolinguistic competence also becomes more important, the higher the learner’s proficiency in other aspects of the language, since native-speaking interlocutors are then more likely to interpret failures to comply with socio-pragmatic norms “as a sign of disrespect, hostility, or other negative attitudes” rather than as a lack of proficiency. For North American and European learners, achieving sociolinguistic competence in Arabic is challenging. It entails, for example, becoming familiar with the highly developed Arabic systems of terms of address (Parkinson 1985), politeness formulae (Ferguson 1976, 1967; Stewart 1996; Davies 1987), and conversational oaths (Abdel-Jawad 2000). With the traditional focus on SA in the Arabic classroom, sociolinguistic competence is a non-issue, since SA is not normally used in the forms of everyday social interactions where these norms come into play. Introducing the teaching of VA, the language of social interaction, implies instruction targeting various aspects of sociolinguistic competence. PTA puts a particular focus on sociolinguistic competence by allowing for detailed in-class discussion of examples of sociolinguistic and socio-pragmatic phenomena.

The confusion of simultaneously learning two related varieties

The most common argument against teaching VA at early levels is what Eisele (2018: 7) called linguistic dissonance: “the confusion created in adult learners by having to learn two different forms of a second or nonnative language simultaneously”. Elsewhere in the literature this is typically referred to as the problem of “confusion”. Parkinson (1985: 27), for example, has argued that “It is very difficult to incorporate Colloquial into a standard Arabic class without leaving students hopelessly confused”, and Alhawary (2013: 30) that parallel instruction in SA and VA puts unrealistic expectations on students, in that it presents “too much input to comprehend and proceduralize”. Eisele (2018: 8) makes the further point that this confusion can also arise from the perspective of the teacher, in that “dealing with multiple structures from multiple target language varieties will tend to decrease this clarity and focus and increase the instructor’s dissonance”. Proponents of early instruction of VA, on the other hand, argue that, rather than shielding students from this form of linguistic variation in Arabic, it should be accepted as part of learning Arabic and students should be provided with the tools needed to handle it (Al-Batal 1992: 302; Younes 1990: 120). These authors also tend to downplay this problem, citing their own experiences as teachers (Younes 2006: 164; Brustad, Al-Batal and al-Tunsi 2011: xiii).

There is little doubt that it is highly useful for students to quickly develop proficiency in VA. There is also little doubt that teaching VA in addition to SA introduces linguistic and pedagogical complications, and we may characterize these two opinions outlined above as emphasizing either pedagogical expediency or communicative relevance. PTA is based on the view that the benefits of early instruction in VA, primarily in terms of communicative competences and student motivation, outweigh its costs in pedagogical complications and “confusion”, but that these costs need to be actively addressed and managed.

Principles of the integrated approach

Two highly influential approaches for teaching VA alongside SA are the integrated approaches developed by, on the one hand, Younes and his colleagues (Younes 1990, 2006, 2015, 2018; Younes, Weath...
erspoon and Foster 2014; Younes and Huntley 2019), and on the other by Al-Batal and his colleagues (Al-Batal 1992; Brustad, Al-Batal and al-Tunsi 2011). While not identical, they are both designed around two fundamental principles that contrast with PTA, namely the inseparability of SA and VA, and presenting VA as an exclusively oral register, thus avoiding exposing students to written VA. The first principle is a reaction against the traditional exclusive focus on SA in the Arabic classroom (Al-Batal 2018b: 5–8; Younes 2015: 26–30). Proponents of the integrated approach, in accordance with the majority view in the field, argue that VA is best introduced at the beginner level. In addition to this, however, they emphasize the interdependence and inseparability of the two varieties, seen primarily in code-switching and mixing between them and in their complementary distribution for different functions, with SA being used for reading and writing and VA for conversation. According to Al-Batal (1992: 298), his approach "does not treat these varieties [SA and VA] as discrete and separate entities [...] but as components of one integrated linguistic system". More recently, he has framed this idea with the slogan “Arabic as one language” (Al-Batal 2018b). Younes (2006: 159), similarly, describes the two varieties as constituting "one communicative system". This, he argues, should be reflected by tightly integrating the use of SA and VA in the classroom, using SA for reading and writing activities, and VA for speaking and listening activities, including for speaking about SA text (Al-Batal 1992: 298–9; Younes 2015: 32–33). For this tight and authentic integration of SA and VA, the two varieties must both be covered in the same classroom sessions. Dividing the teaching of SA and VA in separate courses, they argue, misrepresents the language by creating an "unnatural division" (Younes 2006: 164), or a "false dichotomy" (Younes and Huntley 2019: 294).

The second principle of the integrated approach is that of sociolinguistically authentic forms of input, as based on the Fergusonian model of diglossia: SA is used for reading and writing, and to some extent for listening, while VA is used only for speaking and listening. As Younes (1990: 115) explains: "students see in print only words that are acceptable in MSA". VA texts in textbooks designed for the integrated approach are accordingly only presented in the form of audio or video, not as written text (Brustad, Al-Batal and al-Tunsi 2011; Younes, Weatherspoon and Foster 2014).

None of these principles are intrinsic to the early instruction of VA. The main argument for the inseparability of SA and VA is their complementary functional distribution and the fact that native speakers switch between the two in line with switches in context. Younes and Huntley (2019: 295) illustrate this with the following three examples:


Examples such as these can also be interpreted as arguments for the separability of SA and VA in that they demonstrate how they are clearly functionally separated. Indeed, on the same page as the quote above, and just after making the point that SA and VA are "both indispensable and inseparable", Younes and Huntley (2019: 295) continue:

In spite of the commonly expressed reservations about Ferguson’s analysis and the existence of numerous counter examples, the basic pattern of linguistic behavior among Arabic speakers still holds: ‘Āmmiyya for ordinary conversation and Fuṣḥā for reading, writing and scripted speech.

Native speakers compartmentalize SA and VA in largely predictable ways. Building on this line of reasoning, we may be justified in compartmentalizing VA and SA in teaching as well, if it is found to be pedagogically advantageous.

3 ‘Arabiyyat al-Naas does supply transcripts of the video material, but only in the Teacher’s Guide in the accompanying online material which is not intended for use by students (Younes, Weatherspoon and Foster 2014: 5).
The second principle of the integrated approach, that only SA is written and that exposure to written VA should therefore be avoided, reflects Ferguson’s original conception of diglossia, but fits poorly with current linguistic practices. VA is today the dominant variety in many forms of informal written communication, including in social media, text messaging, and, depending on the level of formality, in e-mails (Kindt, Høigilt and Kebede 2016; Alkhamees, Elabdali and Walters 2019). For many Arabic speakers, these forms of communication make up a large part of the writing they encounter and produce in their daily lives. The claim that VA is not a written language (still common in Arabic linguistics) is, in the age of rapid electronic written communication, increasingly untrue. Familiarity with written forms of VA is today an important part of sociolinguistic proficiency in Arabic. Furthermore, presenting VA only or primarily as aural input risks demoting VA to a subsidiary position by denying students a way of writing this variety, thereby also denying them effective study techniques, such as producing vocabulary lists, memorizing conversational routines, and careful textual analysis.

The Arabic program at the University of Gothenburg

The Arabic program at GU was restructured in 2019 with the adoption of PTA with the inclusion of instruction in VA from the first semester. The program had previously followed a traditional approach with its sole focus on SA for both oral and literacy skills, and with VA introduced only from a theoretical perspective in the third semester. The main impetus for the restructuring of the program was a growing frustration among the teachers about the detachment of the language taught in the program from their experiences of the linguistic realities of Arabic. A further trigger and inspiration for this change was the publication of Al-Batal (2018a).

The first semester of the restructured program begins with a month-long introductory course in which students are introduced to the Arabic script, phonology, and basic vocabulary. The rest of the semester is divided into two parallel courses: a SA course with a total of six classroom hours per week from Monday to Thursday, and a course in Syrian VA, with two class hours every Friday. This same structure is continued in the second semester, where the VA course also includes training in a formal spoken register in the form of prepared student presentations on various topics. In preparation for this, the diglossic code-mixing and switching that is typical of the formal Arabic register (Mejdell 2021) and their mechanisms are discussed in class. The rest of the present discussion focuses on the first semester of the program.

The two parallel courses use the Al-Kitaab Arabic textbook (Brustad, Al-Batal and al-Tunsi 2011). PTA does not in principle require this textbook. Indeed, PTA goes against the explicit intent of the textbook’s authors in some fundamental ways, as explained above. This book is, however, well suited for PTA and the book was a source of inspiration for its design. In Al-Kitaab, SA, Syrian VA, and Egyptian VA are presented in parallel; word lists for the three varieties are presented in parallel columns, many exercises are given in alternative forms for the different varieties, and SA texts are presented for reading comprehension, while VA texts are presented in audio or video format for listening comprehension. Only the Syrian VA material is used in the VA course at GU. Each week, the SA material in one chapter from al-Kitaab is covered in the SA course, with a focus on grammar and reading and writing skills. At the end of the week, the same chapter is covered in the VA course, revisiting the themes, grammar, and vocabulary from the perspective of Syrian VA with a focus on speaking and listening skills. The division between writing and speaking skills in the two courses is not absolute. The SA course may feature some oral activities and the teacher may give instructions in SA or VA, but VA is not the object of instruction. Conversely, and as further explained below, in the VA course comparisons with SA are made and students do read text, but SA is not the object of instruction. The different foci of the two courses are reflected in their exams, with a written exam for the SA
course and an oral exam for the VA course. Some care is taken at the beginning of the VA course to explain the pedagogical challenges presented by diglossia and how they are tackled in the program.

The bulk of the VA course is based on video-recorded VA dialogues from Al-Kitaab, of which there is one in each chapter for each of the featured varieties of VA. The dialogues are accurately described in Al-Kitaab as being "linguistically challenging and culturally rich. Each dialogue includes many of the vocabulary items that the chapter has aimed to activate and presents them in different kinds of scenes from everyday life" (Brustad, Al-Batal and al-Tunsi 2011, xv). The dialogues are cleverly written to give an authentic feel while relying on the limited linguistic material covered in the book thus far. The Syrian VA dialogues serve as the main text for the VA course. Contrary to principles of the integrated approach and the intentions of the authors of Al-Kitaab, these dialogues have all been transcribed in the Arabic script and these transcripts are distributed to students. An example transcript can be found in the Appendix.

In preparation for each class, students are instructed, in the following order, to a) review the vocabulary of the chapter and note differences between SA and the VA items; b) watch the video one or more times and try to grasp the general content, c) watch the video with the transcript at hand whilst taking notes on any questions or comments they might have. Students are informed that they may not understand every detail of the dialogue after this preparation, but that they should have grasped the general gist of it and that they may be called on to provide a summary of it in class. During the first hour of the class the dialogue is discussed in some detail, based on students’ questions and on specific points the teacher may want to cover. The discussion takes the form of an instructional conversation in which "the teacher encourages expression of students’ ideas, builds upon information students provide and experiences they have had, and guides students to increasingly sophisticated levels of understanding” (Goldenberg 1991: 1). This is a form of teaching that is especially suited to teaching domains of knowledge that are fuzzy and not clearly structured (Goldenberg 1991), and thus ideally suited to teach communicative competence (Compernolle and Williams 2012). The aim of this conversation is to create a non-threatening atmosphere for the shared exploration of the texts. Many different aspects of the dialogues are typically covered in these discussions, including grammar, lexicon, and pragmatics. Discussions on grammar and lexicon typically entail comparing it with the SA forms covered during the week in the SA course, and a brief formal exposition of VA grammar, a point further elaborated on below. It should be noted that the transcripts are intended as a means for reaching oral proficiency and that students are not tested in reading or writing VA.

As an illustration of the instructional conversation as applied to these texts, consider the transcript of the first VA dialogue in Al-Kitaab found in the Appendix. At the beginning of the class, when this text is discussed, a student is called to summarize the text in their first language. The purpose of this is to establish the content of the text so that the focus can then shift to linguistic matters. The floor is then opened for students to ask questions and make comments. Questions are typically raised on pragmatic matters. For this text, this includes the terms of address ḥadrtak (line 1) and sidi (line 16), instigating a discussion on terms of address in Arabic and their uses and implications. Among the other politeness phrases, students typically also react to the phrase ahla wa-sahla (line 10), which they may have learned as a greeting, here appearing in the middle of a conversation. This prompts a discussion of the use of this phrase as a general polite “conversation filler”. The discourse markers ṭayyeb (line 4), ya’ni (line 7), and lēš (line 8) are also typically brought up by students. If asked to speculate, students often turn out to have hypotheses on the pragmatic functions of these words, which usually turn out to be accurate. For some words, such as the conversational oath wālla (line 13), students often have own experiences of its use which they can relate and feed into the discussion. For all these words, it is an engaging and useful exercise to try to find phrases with similar

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4 These were until recently freely available online but have now been placed behind a paywall.
5 The transcripts are available for download at https://github.com/andreasmhallberg/al-kitaab-dialecttexts.
uses in the students’ own language for comparison. Finding such parallels often makes expressions that first seem strange more intuitively comprehensible. Questions on pronunciation (e.g., of /q/ as glottal stop, lines 5 and 7) or on grammar (e.g., the b-prefix on verbs, lines 10 and 13; more on this below) are either addressed there and then or only commented on briefly with a more thorough explanation postponed until later in the course when the matter is addressed more systematically.

The second hour of the class is devoted to oral exercises in VA based on the vocabulary and phrases in the dialogue. These exercises are typically in the form of an information retrieval task, where students use Syrian VA to gather information about their classmates that is then reported to the class. Having discussed the text above, students may ask one another where they are from and where they live, using phrases from the text. Alternatively, students produce short sketches modeled on the dialogue. In connection with these exercises, strategic competence is taught explicitly whenever the need arises. This includes, for example, how to ask for repetition or reformulation, how to ask for the meaning of a specific word, or how to ask the interlocutor to speak more slowly. This second hour of the class forms the bulk of in-class oral training.

The examination of the VA course consists of two parts. In the first, students work in pairs to prepare a sketch in which they play acquaintances (fictive characters or themselves) meeting one another in the street and making small talk, using appropriate greetings and other politeness formulae. Students are given ample time out of class to prepare, and the sketch is performed in front of the class at the end of the course. The second part is in the form of an individual unprepared conversation with the teacher in which students are asked questions about themselves on topics covered in the course. For this part, students are explicitly informed that the use of strategic competences will be positively evaluated.

Advantages of a parallel approach

The first of the two defining features of PTA is that SA and VA are taught in separate but parallel courses. This has several advantages that have not been recognized in the literature.

First, it provides a formalized and structured framework for harnessing the overlap between SA and VA, in that VA, in its separate course, is taught as an extension and modification of SA. Having instruction in SA and VA organized into separate courses is often taken to mean that they must be independent of one another and that overlapping linguistic material is therefore by necessity duplicated. Younes and Huntley (2019: 294), for example, writes that teaching VA in a separate course places unreasonable requirements on the AFL [Arabic as a foreign language] student, who must now pay twice as much in course fees and materials, as well as committing double the amount of time to learning one language.

This does not need to be the case, provided that the SA and VA courses are designed to run in tandem. Consider Figure 1, which represents SA and VA as circles of overlapping features. In PTA, features in the SA circle are covered in the SA course during the week. Classes in the VA at the end of the week need then only focus on VA specific features. Put differently, with the large amount of overlap between the two varieties, the beginning learner of SA also, automatically, learns large swathes of VA, a fact that can be exploited with careful planning. Since the VA slice is relatively small, less class time and fewer credits are allotted to the VA course.6

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6 The amount of overlap is difficult to quantify, and Figure 1 is therefore somewhat impressionistic. If the overlap is conceptualized as smaller, the approach presented here will be less effective.
Two examples may serve to illustrate this point. Nominal annexation (Ar. *iḍāfa*) is a frequent and central construction in both SA (1a) and Syrian VA (1b). In the chapter where this construction is introduced and explained in the SA class it is also introduced in the VA text. Since it is virtually identical in both varieties it does not need to be explained again in the VA course. The alternative VA construction with a possessive exponent (Eksell 1980), in Syrian VA normally *taba‘* (1c), does need to be introduced to students at some point and its use in relation to *iḍāfa* explained. This construction is specific to VA and thus represents the right-hand slice in Figure 1.

![Figure 1: Standard and Vernacular Arabic overlap](image)

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7 See Ryding (2005: 8) for this construction in SA and Cowell (2005: 456–75) for Syrian VA.
8 According to Procházk’a (2021: 232), "Synthetic noun annexation (Arabic *iḍāfa*) usually remains the default case [in VA]; only in Moroccan Arabic and some isolated dialects of Anatolia has the use of the linker become the default procedure with lexicalized remains of *iḍāfa* constructions."
Table 1: Inflection of yašrab ‘drink’ in SA and VA

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>SA</th>
<th>Syrian VA</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>ašrab</td>
<td>b-ašrab</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2m</td>
<td>tašrab</td>
<td>b-tašrab</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2f</td>
<td>tašrabīn</td>
<td>b-tašrabi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3m</td>
<td>yašrab</td>
<td>b-yašrab</td>
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<tr>
<td>3f</td>
<td>tašrab</td>
<td>b-tašrab</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The amount of explanation required for a grammatical feature in VA thus differs depending on its amount of overlap with SA. Generally, however, relatively little time is needed to explain grammar in the VA course since it is only deviations from or additions to SA that need to be covered. For this purpose, grammatical instruction in Syrian VA would benefit greatly from a pedagogical reference grammar, which the field is currently lacking.

Second, teaching VA in a separate course makes it relatively easy to add it to an existing program which only includes instruction in SA. The VA course can be grafted onto the existing SA-based program with minimal disruption of established SA teaching practices by limiting oral exercises in the existing SA course to free up time for the VA course.

Third, a parallel approach makes the Arabic program adaptable to the availability of teacher resources. Teaching the communicative competences required for VA puts high requirements on the teacher’s communicative competence and knowledge of socio-cultural norms, as well as their ability to identify and explicate these norms (Canale and Swain 1980: 33). These are not requirements for teaching SA since it is a written language in which the socio-cultural norms of oral communication do not apply. In a parallel approach, teacher competences can be allocated to the courses where they best fit, rather than requiring all teachers to have all these competences.

Fourth, the parallel approach provides a way of partially adapting the program to the needs of heritage learners. Heritage learners often have a high-level of proficiency in informal registers of the language, but a low level of proficiency in formal and written registers (Polinsky and Kagan 2007; Montrul 2010). For Arabic, this translates to heritage learners typically having good command of VA but not of SA (Albirini 2014). Furthermore, the presence of orally highly proficient heritage learners in the VA course can be intimidating for the true beginners in the class and makes for differences in proficiency levels in the classroom that may be difficult for the teacher to manage. In a parallel approach, this can be accommodated by heritage learners participating only in the SA course, which is the one most relevant to them. At UG, a procedure has been adopted whereby heritage learners can take a simple oral test at the beginning of the semester to confirm their proficiency in VA, after which they receive credits for this course and need not attend. The relevance of this point clearly depends on the number of heritage students enrolled in the program. This number tends to be relatively small in the US (Abdalla and Al-Batal 2011: 9) but is considerably larger in many European countries (Versteegh 2006: 10).

Advantages of a text-based approach

Providing transcripts of vernacular dialogues to students has significant pedagogical advantages. First, making the basic text available to students as a transcript helps to mitigate the difficulty of listening comprehension in the target language at normal talking speed. For beginner and intermediate level learners, the processing of spoken input is often too slow for many features in speech delivered at a normal speaking pace to be processed. For example, recalling the meaning of a recently memorized word in the input may take seconds, during which processing of the input stream is blocked,
and when the meaning of the word is recalled, the context has shifted. The transcript forms a representation of the oral recording in which the student can regulate the speed, as it were, pausing or rewinding to adapt it to their processing of the input. Note that students are instructed always to watch the video first and to keep it handy throughout their review of the text.

Second, the transcripts provide a visualization of phonology, inflectional forms, and other features that may be perceptually opaque for L2 learners in aural input. It may thus facilitate what Schmidt (1990) has called noticing, the conscious awareness of features in the linguistic input. Schmidt theorizes noticing as being a prerequisite for input (what is perceived) to become intake (the part of the input that informs learning). In bringing linguistic features to the student’s attention, the availability of the transcript may also help prevent phonological and morphological errors from becoming fossilized (Selinker 1972) since the students’ perceptions and analyses of forms are continually checked against the written forms.

Third, and as mentioned above, having transcripts available facilitates the discussion of pragmatic and sociolinguistic features, which is necessary for teaching sociolinguistic proficiency (Canale and Swain 1980: 28), a crucial aspect of teaching a culturally distant language. Any such discussion with reference only to the recording would rely on the learners’ and the teacher’s recollection of the recording, or on awkward repeated playbacks and pauses in class. With the transcript of the recording at hand, these features can instead be pointed to in the text and considered in relation to one another, and their phonological, morphological, and syntactic features are identifiable through the visual representation of the text. The transcript can for, example, be projected on the whiteboard for this purpose.

Fourth, the transcripts serve as a reference for students to revise and revisit material covered in the course. In the VA course at GU, students often take advantage of this to look up suitable phrases in preparation for the sketch in the final exam. Again, this is difficult to do if the material is only available as audio or video.

Finally, the transcripts provide a familiarity with written VA, which has become the default form in informal electronic written communication (Kindt, Høigilt and Kebede 2016; Alkhamees, Elabdali and Walters 2019). Familiarity with this form of writing is crucial for well-rounded communicative competence in contemporary Arab societies.

Two problems with the text-based approach are the lack of a standardized orthography and the limited representation of vowels in the Arabic script. Although spelling conventions are developing for VA with its increased use, it is not standardized and shows considerable variation. Much of the variation in written VA arises from the tension between the firmly established SA orthography and alternative written forms that better represent VA pronunciation, as exemplified in Table 2, with VA forms attested in the Syrian section of the Shami corpus (Abu Kwaik et al. 2018). In transcribing VA material, one has three basic options: a) to follow SA orthography; b) to represent VA phonology as closely as possible; or c) to follow emerging VA spelling conventions, which are typically a compromise between a) and b). These three options each have advantages and disadvantages with pedagogical effects that are difficult to assess. Maintaining SA spelling in the transcripts may have the benefit of reinforcing SA visual word identification; representing VA phonology may help students better identify and develop VA pronunciation; and following VA spelling conventions better reflects the linguistic reality. In the transcripts used at UG, the aim was to follow emerging (Syrian) VA spelling conventions, as informed by informal observations, Syrian informants, and queries in the Shami corpus (Abu Kwaik et al. 2018). It is hoped that future research on VA spelling conventions will lead to better informed choices in this regard.
Table 2: Examples of Standard Arabic and alternative (Syrian) vernacular Arabic orthography.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>SA</th>
<th>VA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>tlaːt</td>
<td>'three'</td>
<td>تلاːت</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ktabo</td>
<td>'his book'</td>
<td>كتابه</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ʔda</td>
<td>'if'</td>
<td>إذا</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ʔnti</td>
<td>'you (fs.)'</td>
<td>أنتي</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The second problem in relying on VA transcripts is the fact that the Arabic script only has graphical representations for the three SA vowels $a$, $u$, and $i$ in their long and short variants. (The consonants of Syrian VA are by and large a reduced set of the SA inventory (Lentin 2006), and thus well represented in the script.) Most varieties of VA have larger sets of vowels. Syrian Arabic, for example, also features the vowels /ə/, /eː/ and /oː/ (Cowell 2005), for which there are no differentiated graphical representations in the Arabic script. In word lists in Al-Kitaab, for instance, the sign kasra, normally representing /i/, is used for Syrian /ə/, without this being commented on. The word /kənt/ 'I was', for example, is written as ˈkɪnt in the book (Brustad, Al-Batal and al-Tunsi 2011: 66). I was made aware of this problem when some students in the oral exam consistently pronounced /kənt/ 'I was' as /kint/, informed by Al-Kitaab. This indicates the need in a text-based approach for explicit explanations of VA phonology and its representation in the script. For these reasons, some authors of VA textbooks opt to present VA in latinized transcription (Woidich and Heinen-Nasr 2004: xi). This comes at the cost of students investing in developing automated skills associated with reading proficiency (for example whole-word reading: Coltheart 2006) for a writing system used only within academia, instead of for the system that is normally used for the language. Mismatches between orthography and phonology are of course not particular to VA but are common in the world’s languages, English being a case in point. Typically, in such languages we do not require students to learn a separate writing system designed specifically for phonological accuracy but rather try to foster reading skills in the script that is in actual use.

Conclusion

The diglossic nature of Arabic makes for a challenging pedagogical situation, in that students need to acquire two related varieties used in complementary contexts. In the quest to find a way to teach both these varieties, teachers need to strike a balance between sociolinguistic authenticity and pedagogical expediency. This article has presented PTA, one attempt at finding such a balance, developed and tested at GU. In this approach, SA and VA are taught in separate parallel courses and instruction in VA is based on video recorded dialogues, together with transcripts of these dialogues. In comparison with the integrated approach, the most common approach for combining the teaching of SA and VA, this approach has several advantages, including facilitating explicit instruction in sociolinguistic competence, making linguistic features of VA more noticeable and discoverable, and allowing for the allocation of teacher resources and specialized competences.

Students’ responses to a new curriculum such as the one described here are difficult to assess since students only experience the one curriculum in which they are taught, with no points of comparison. From a teacher’s perspective, however, it is clear that the new curriculum has offered ways for students to be personally more engaged in their language learning. With Syrian VA, the variety taught at GU, being the dominant variety of the sizable Arabic speaking population in Sweden, students can often relate linguistic matters discussed in the classroom to their experience of Arabic outside of class. The students are generally enthusiastic about the VA course and especially about gain-
ing an understanding of pragmatic linguistic functions in the new language and thus developing communicative competence.

It is not claimed here that PTA is the optimal approach for all and every Arabic program, nor that it cannot be further improved. It does, however, have advantages that may make it an attractive alternative for program developers seeking to include instruction in VA in an existing Arabic program.

References


Appendix
أهلاً وسهلاً. وписьًّما. وخطِّبْنَكْ شُو بْيُشْيِلْ؟

ألاً والأمة ما بَيُشْيِلْ. أنا طالب بِجَامِعَة. وَمَثَّقْ بِقِيَاسَ الأَدِبِ الفَرْنِسي.

صحيح؟ وأنا كمان طالب بَنَفْسَ الجَامِعَة.

وَلَّه؟ وَمَثَّقْ يَتَنُّدِّرُ بِالجَامِعَة؟

أنا بَدْرُس جُرَائِفَاء وَالْحَمْدُ لَهُ!

وَلَّيْنَ الْحَمْدُ لَلَّه؟

يا بَيِّنِي، أي أَستَاذَ أَدِبً، وأَيُّ أَسْتَاذَة أَدِبْ كَمَان. وأَخِي كَمَان تَنُّدِّرَ أَدِبً. وأَنا ما بَدْيَ أَدَرْسُ نَفْسَ المَشي.

[...]

تَشْكِّرُنا كَثْبً.

أَنا كَمَان.

أ. هالبيرغ

 Maarkevicius