

The Reality of Teaching Arabic Grammar at the Algerian University

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Abstract:

“Grammar” is considered the most important pillar of the Arabic linguistic sciences. It has received considerable attention and care from Arabic scholars, both ancient and modern, because it constitutes the foundation of the Arabic language and has enabled the language to preserve its continuity and endurance throughout the ages.

Given the importance of “grammar” in learning Arabic, it has become one of the foremost concerns of university education in all Arab countries. Those responsible for higher education strive to make grammar accessible to both novice learners and specialists by reviewing curricula (content), developing teaching methods and techniques in accordance with modern strategies and approaches, and paying attention to the key components of the educational process (the teacher, the learner, and the subject matter). Their aim is to improve and advance the learning process and to find solutions to the problems that may hinder its progress and prevent the achievement of the desired objectives.

This research paper seeks to diagnose the current state of teaching “Arabic grammar” at the Algerian university, proceeding from the following research problem: What is the reality of teaching Arabic grammar at the Algerian university, and by what means can it be improved?

Keywords: Content, Arabic grammar, didactics, reality, prospects.

1- Introduction:

“Grammar” is one of the noblest and most eminent branches of Arabic linguistic study. Through it, the tongue becomes correct and fluent and is spared the defects of inarticulateness and grammatical error. It is the foundation of the Arabic language; therefore, one should be keen to learn and master it, for it guards those who speak and elevates them wherever they sit. In this regard, the poet says ¹:

Acquire grammar what an excellent acquisition!

Grammar is an adornment and a beauty to be sought.

Its possessor is honoured wherever they sit;

Whoever misses it becomes blind and falls into decline.

Perhaps nothing demonstrates the value and merit of “grammar” more clearly than what was narrated of the Messenger may Allah’s blessings and peace be upon him when he heard a man committing a grammatical error in his speech and said: “Guide your brother, for he has gone astray.”² Likewise, ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb may Allah be pleased with him said: “Learn grammar just as you learn the traditions and the religious obligations.”³

The benefit of “grammar” may be summed up in the words of one of the Arabic scholars, al-Zajjājī (d. 228 AH), who stated:

“If someone were to ask: What is the benefit of learning grammar, when most people speak naturally, without applying grammatical inflection or possessing any knowledge of it, yet they understand and make themselves understood by others? The answer is that its benefit lies in enabling one to speak the language of the Arabs correctly and authentically, without alteration or distortion; to preserve the Book of Almighty Allah which is the foundation and mainstay of religion and worldly life; to understand the reports of the Prophet may Allah’s blessings and peace be upon him and to establish their true meanings, for those meanings cannot be properly understood unless they are accorded their full due in grammatical inflection”⁴ and elucidation.

Given the importance of “grammar” in correcting speech, it has received considerable attention since its establishment at the hands of Abū al-Aswad al-Du’alī (d. 69 AH). The emergence of “the science of grammar” was closely linked to the Holy Qur’an following the spread of grammatical error, which corrupted the Qur’an’s meanings and implications. Scholars consequently believed that rules had to be established to protect it from scribal error and distortion. They further maintained that grammar should take precedence over the other Arabic linguistic sciences. In this regard, Ibn Khaldūn (d. 808 AH) states that the sciences of the Arabic language rest upon four pillars: “They are lexicology, grammar, rhetoric, and literature... The conclusion to be drawn is that grammar is the most important and should take precedence, for through it the fundamental meanings intended by linguistic expression become clear: the subject is distinguished from the object and the topic from the predicate. Without it, the very basis of meaningful communication through speech would remain unknown.”⁵

The importance of “grammar” is perhaps a matter over which there is no disagreement, whether among ancient or modern scholars. ‘Abbās Ḥasan (1901–1979) went so far as to liken “grammar” to a constitution, stating:

“The position of grammar among the humanities is comparable to that of a constitution among modern laws. It is their foundation, from which they derive support and whose spirit they draw upon; they refer back to it in their major questions and subsidiary branches of legislation. You will not find any of those disciplines capable of standing independently of grammar, dispensing with its assistance, or seeking guidance from any light other than its illumination and direction.”⁶

Accordingly, the place of grammar in the Arabic language is comparable to that of salt in food.⁷

Since “grammar” is the standard by which the correctness of the Arabic language is measured and the foundation upon which its learning and teaching are based, it has become one of the foremost concerns of university education throughout the Arab world, including Algeria. We have therefore chosen to devote this research paper to examining the reality of teaching Arabic grammar at the Algerian university. It attempts to diagnose and analyse this reality in order to determine the extent of the correspondence between the actual grammatical proficiency of university students and the objectives and aspirations of those concerned with higher education. The study thus proceeds from the following research problem: What is the reality of teaching Arabic grammar at the Algerian university, and by what means can it be improved?

2- The Concept of “Grammar”:

There is no doubt that “grammar” is not merely a set of rules and principles to be memorised theoretically; rather, it is the actual practice of those rules and their natural, instinctive use, in the manner innate to the Arabs of old, from which we should not deviate.

This is reflected in Ibn Jinnī’s (d. 392 AH) conception of grammar. He defines “grammar” as:

“Following the manner of the Arabs in their speech and its various forms, including grammatical inflection and such matters as the dual, the plural, diminutives, broken plurals, annexation, attribution,

composition, and others, so that those who are not native speakers of Arabic may attain the eloquence of its people and speak it even if they are not among them, and so that any native speaker who deviates from it may be brought back to it.”⁸

We discern the same concept in the words of al-Sakkākī (d. 626 AH):

“Know that grammar consists in following the proper manner of combining words so as to convey the intended meaning, proceeding according to standards derived from an inductive examination of Arab speech and rules established on that basis, through which errors in construction”⁹ or composition may be avoided.

On the basis of what these two scholars stated, we understand “grammar” to mean following in the footsteps of the Arabs and imitating their manner of speech in terms of formulating structures, constructing styles and expressions, and using them correctly to convey the intended meaning. Thus, “grammar” is “the law governing the composition of speech and an explanation of the form that every word must assume within a sentence, as well as the relationship of one sentence to others, so that discourse may be coherent and capable of conveying its meaning”¹⁰ correctly and accurately.

Grammar is therefore the foundation upon which speech is woven and arranged. On this basis, ‘Abd al-Qāhir al-Jurjānī (d. 471 AH) developed his “Theory of Composition” in his study of the phenomenon of the Qur’an’s inimitability. He linked composition to grammar, defining composition as follows:

“To arrange your speech in the manner required by the science of grammar, to act according to its laws and principles, to understand the methods it has established and not deviate from them, and to observe the conventions prescribed for you without neglecting any of them.”¹¹

In light of the foregoing, there can be no doubt that the Arabic language is closely connected to “grammar.” Its soundness and correctness depend upon adherence to its grammatical rules and principles. In other words, “grammar” is what safeguards the Arabic language’s permanence and continuity throughout time and history.

This is perhaps confirmed by the condition from which the Arabic language currently suffers. Many of those concerned with Arabic lament the numerous violations of its rules and principles committed by its speakers and writers. They believe that the language has undergone a genuine deterioration affecting its vocabulary, structures, sentences, meanings, and styles. This concern is shared by many of those engaged in public affairs, given that language is the most prominent social phenomenon expressing the identity of a nation. Any harm to its distinctive characteristics signals an assault upon that identity and the destabilisation of its components. This is because language is not merely a means of expressing a person’s daily life; rather, before and alongside that function, it constitutes a way of thinking, a mode of perception, and a method of interpreting reality and its phenomena, as well as thought and its forms. Sound interpretation necessarily requires soundness at every level of linguistic performance.¹²

Hence, “didactics” seeks to give attention to grammar “as a practical means of developing learners’ abilities so that they may acquire linguistic skills and employ them functionally. This requires continually benefiting from scientific experiments and expertise that are directly and inherently connected to the intellectual, physiological, psychological, and social dimensions of actual human speech performance.”¹³

As a “pedagogical practice,” didactics has therefore devoted considerable attention to the principal components of the educational process the teacher, the learner, and knowledge in the following respects:¹⁴

1-The teacher: their training, mastery of teaching methods, and ability to use instructional resources and assessment methods.



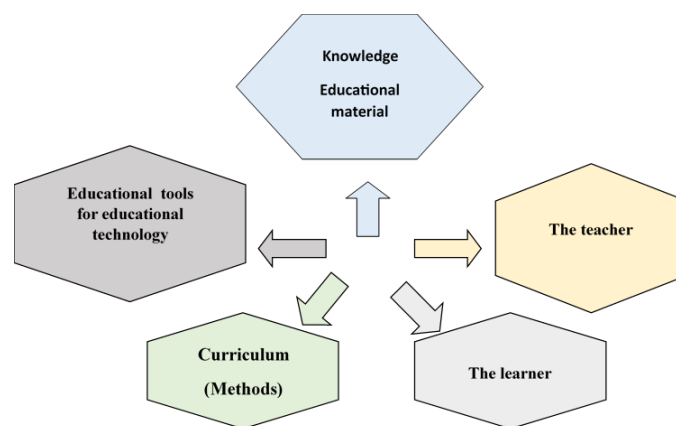
2-The learner: their personality, inclinations, and abilities.

3-The subject matter: its characteristics, importance, and function.

Didactics also “seeks to employ new methods that facilitate the learning process and are founded upon psychological principles, as well as the learner’s dispositions and intellectual abilities, throughout all stages of education. It is not easy to devise teaching methods without studying the human psyche at its various developmental stages, including its inclinations and instincts, behavioural patterns, and readiness to receive knowledge and learning. Psychologists and educationalists have therefore consistently developed teaching methods on the basis of psychological analysis and extensive experiments tracing the stages of human development and levels of intellectual growth.”¹⁵

Choosing appropriate methods for conveying knowledge and making it more accessible to learners’ minds is likewise one of the most fundamental factors in the educational process.

On the basis of the foregoing, it may be said that the principal components of the educational process are:



However, the actual state of Arabic-language education does not reflect the efforts, endeavours, and aspirations of those involved in university education. Since our research is confined to the teaching of grammar, we shall examine this reality through the grammatical content taught within the Arabic Language and Literature programme in the Department of Arabic Language.

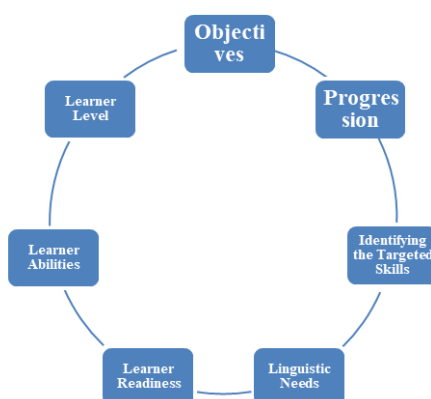
3- Grammatical Content:

Grammatical content is defined as “the totality of linguistic and non-linguistic elements (cultural elements, etc.) that constitute the subject matter presented to the learner. By this, we mean the grammatical knowledge prescribed for pupils at a particular educational stage. The content presented

to pupils constitutes the principal means of achieving the desired objectives. It represents a portion of linguistic and cultural knowledge selected and presented according to linguistic and pedagogical criteria. It is divided into progressively ordered instructional units that form a series of lessons in which the characteristics of the linguistic system, the learners' level, and their capacity for attainment are taken into account."¹⁶

The preparation of curricula, or "content," is an important undertaking entrusted to university lecturers and researchers who specialise both in the subject itself and in related academic fields and disciplines, such as linguistics, applied linguistics, didactics, educational science, psychology, and sociology. The purpose is to draw upon the latest approaches and theories developed in the field of language teaching when selecting the components of the curriculum, with a view to raising learners' qualitative level and achieving the intended objective: the formation of a competent and proficient student capable of solving linguistic problems in various situations.

The scientific determination of content requires consideration of several aspects, including the following:¹⁷



4- A Review of University-Level Grammatical Content (Bachelor's and Master's Degrees):

4-1- First-Year Bachelor's Programme:

1. Arabic grammar: its emergence and codification; the concept and scope of grammar; and the concepts of *al-kalām* (speech), *al-kalimah* (the word), and *al-kalim* (words).

2. Authorship in Arabic grammar: the earliest works.

3. Grammatical inflection and indeclinability educational lessons.

4. The verbal sentence and its patterns; the components of the verbal sentence.

5. Intransitive and transitive verbs: the verb and its divisions; types of intransitive and transitive verbs.

6. The subject: its definition, forms, grammatical ruling, and position; agreement between the verb and the subject in number; omission of dual and plural pronoun markers from the verb; and the masculine or feminine form of the verb.

7. Complements of the verbal sentence: objects; the direct object its definition, divisions, and grammatical rulings; the placement of the direct object before or after the subject according to its syntactic position; and placing the object before both the verb and the subject.

8. The absolute object: its definition and the reason for its designation; related issues; the unspecified and specified verbal noun; the declinable and indeclinable verbal noun;

substitutes for the verbal noun; the governing element of the absolute object; its grammatical rulings; and the verbal noun used as a substitute for the verb.

9. The object of cause or purpose: its definition; the conditions governing its accusative case; its grammatical rulings; and the element governing its accusative case.

10. The adverbial object, or adverbial expression of time and place: its definition and related issues; indefinite and definite adverbs; declinable and indeclinable adverbs; the accusative case of the adverb; the element governing its case; substitutes for the adverb; and inflected and uninflected adverbs.

11. The comitative object: its definition; the conditions governing its accusative case; its grammatical rulings; and the possible grammatical states of the noun occurring after the conjunction *wāw*.

12. The circumstantial accusative: its conditions; its governing element and antecedent; its grammatical rulings; the sentence functioning as a circumstantial expression; the rules governing the circumstantial *wāw*; and circumstantial forms and structures.

13. Specification: its definition, types, and related issues; specification of entities and its grammatical ruling; the specification of explicit numerals; the interrogative *kam* and its specification; the declarative *kam* and its specification; *ka'ayyin* and its specification; *kadhā* and its specification; and selected grammatical rules of specification.

14. Exception: its definition; the components of the exceptive sentence; particles and terms of exception first, particles of exception; second, nouns of exception; and third, verbs of exception.

4-2- Second-Year Bachelor's Programme:

1. Predication in the Nominal Sentence	The subject and predicate: practical exercises
2. Omission in the Nominal Sentence	Omission of the predicate and the subject
3. Introducing Sentence Modifiers (1)	<i>Kāna</i> and its sisters, and words that function similarly
4. Introducing Sentence Modifiers (2)	<i>Inna</i> and its sisters, and words that function similarly
5. Introducing Sentence Modifiers (3)	<i>Ẓanna</i> and its sisters
6. Verbs of Proximity	Their grammatical analysis and meanings
7. Nouns in the Genitive Case: Types and Meanings	Genitive nouns governed by prepositions and annexation (<i>iḍāfa</i>)
8. Conjunctions: Types and Meanings	Meanings of coordinating conjunctions
9. Definiteness and Indefiniteness	Types of definite nouns
10. Ambiguous Nouns	Demonstrative and relative pronouns

11. Grammatical Dependents	Grammatical analysis of adjectives, apposition, and emphasis
12. The Vocative Style	Its particles and grammatical analysis
13. Types of Sentences (1)	Sentences that have a syntactic position in grammatical analysis
14. Types of Sentences (2)	Sentences that have no syntactic position in grammatical analysis

4-3- Third-Year Bachelor's Programme:

1. Grammar and Its Linguistic Applications
2. The Nominal Sentence: Its Main Components (the Subject and the Predicate)
3. Sentence Modifiers (<i>Nawāsikh</i>)
4. The Verbal Sentence:
– Its main components (the verb, the subject, and the direct object)
– Its types

4-4- First-Year Master's Programme:

1	Theoretical Introduction
2	Defining the Concepts of the Sentence and Speech
3	Sentence-Construction Units
4	The Nominal Sentence
5	The Verbal Sentence and Its Complements
6	Elements Related to the Nominal Sentence
7	Elements Related to the Verbal Sentence
8	Nouns in the Accusative Case
9	The Circumstantial Accusative

10	The Object of Reason or Purpose
11	The Direct Object
12	Nouns in the Nominative Case
13	The Subject or Agent
14	The Predicate

5- A Critical Review of University-Level Grammatical Content (Bachelor's and Master's Degrees) in the Department of Arabic Language:

Our review of the university-level grammatical content taught in the Bachelor's and Master's programmes of the Department of Arabic Language led us to the following conclusions:

The lessons lack integration and contain considerable repetition.

They lack a coherent knowledge structure, or possess only a relative degree of cognitive organisation.

Some lessons are incompatible with the time allocated to their delivery—one ninety-minute session per week. Certain lessons require more than one session to cover all their issues, as they require explanation, simplification, and practical application.

The allocated number of teaching hours is insufficient to cover the grammar syllabus, given the number of scheduled lessons.

The lessons are sufficient to meet learners' needs; however, the available time prevents the complete coverage of all the academic material.

Most of the prescribed lessons fall within the category of pedagogical grammar and cover grammatical topics that constitute fundamental principles which students should have acquired during earlier stages of education. At the university level, it may be necessary to combine pedagogical or functional grammar with the scholarly grammar intended for researchers and specialists, which requires careful reflection and an in-depth study of the foundational grammatical works of such scholars as Sībawayh and Ibn al-Sarrāj, among others.

The curriculum components the principal topics are reasonably appropriate to the students' level and are capable of preparing proficient students who possess mastery of both oral and written linguistic performance, provided that learners have the desire, motivation, incentive, and love of knowledge, and that they are taught by instructors who possess methodological and disciplinary competence and are conscious of their role and responsibility.

6- Conclusion:

Through this research paper on “The Reality of Teaching Arabic Grammar at the Algerian University,” and on the basis of our review of the grammatical content, we have reached the following conclusions:

The grammar curriculum lacks, to some extent, pedagogical criteria and methodological foundations in its construction. This calls for a serious reconsideration of the didactics of Arabic grammar by the university education system.

Students lack an appreciation or taste for learning grammar and hold a pessimistic view of the “science of grammar.” This may be attributable to the abundance and complexity of grammatical

issues, since grammar is “difficult to navigate because of the dispersal of its questions, the multiplicity of its conditions, and its need for an alert mind, a ready faculty, and exceptional intelligence.”¹⁸

This may have led to the growing calls for the simplification of grammar as a means of advancing the Arabic language and facilitating its acquisition, as well as “enabling students and learners to master this language and equipping them with the ability to use its styles correctly and spontaneously in both writing and conversation. This is the field in which authors compete and in which some surpass others in terms of deficiency or completeness, proficiency, and innovation.”¹⁹ The simplification of grammar has thus become necessary in order to keep pace with contemporary changes and learners’ needs.

The principle of gradual progression is not observed in the lessons and curriculum topics, despite its importance in facilitating and simplifying the acquisition of knowledge. This is affirmed by Ibn Khaldūn (d. 808 AH), who states:

“Know that instructing learners in the sciences is beneficial only when it proceeds gradually, little by little. At first, learners should be presented with issues from each branch of the discipline that constitute the foundations of that branch... In doing so, due consideration must be given to the strength of their intellect and their readiness to receive what is presented to them... before they become prepared to understand it, for receptivity to knowledge and readiness to comprehend it develop gradually. At the outset, the learner is generally incapable of understanding... If advanced matters are presented at the beginning, when the learner is still incapable of understanding and comprehending them and remains unprepared for them, the learner’s mind becomes weary. The learner then attributes this to the difficulty of the discipline itself, becomes reluctant to study it, turns away from accepting it, and persists in abandoning it.”²⁰

This may explain why students perceive “grammar” as difficult and avoid everything related to grammatical studies.

Perhaps the greatest harm to the process of teaching “grammar” does not lie in the subject itself, but rather in several other factors, including:

Students’ lack of motivation, incentive, desire, and love of learning.

The absence of a sound teaching approach and methodology.

The failure to employ educational technology and make effective use of teaching aids in grammar instruction, while continuing to present grammar through an abstract and traditional method based solely on examples followed by a rule.

The entrenchment of the idea that Arabic grammar is difficult, that it constitutes an obstacle to learning Arabic, and that it must therefore be simplified and renewed. This is an unfounded and misleading idea. If grammar were truly an obstacle to language learning, why do we not hear similar calls to simplify the grammar of other languages? Grammar is a linguistic feature shared by human languages in general and is not exclusive to Arabic, although grammatical inflection is among the distinctive characteristics of the Arabic language. This is perhaps the clearest evidence that the problem of learning and teaching Arabic does not lie in its grammar; rather, it is solely a problem of methodology, approach, and teaching method.

7- Recommendations:

Encouraging research in the field of Arabic grammar didactics in order to develop effective and practical solutions based on contemporary approaches.

Requiring teachers to use Modern Standard Arabic in the classroom and throughout the university, while encouraging students to do the same. This would provide students with continuous linguistic immersion through conversations, everyday interactions, teaching, and other activities.

Benefiting from pioneering experiences in Western countries in the field of language teaching in general and Arabic-language teaching in particular, as well as from the Turkish, Chinese, Nigerian, Indonesian, and other experiences.

Extending the teaching of grammar to all university disciplines, such as the social sciences, humanities, and political sciences, rather than restricting it to Arabic Language and Literature programmes. Even in the Department of Arabic Literature within literary and critical studies students study grammar only during the second year. The university education system's approach to Arabic grammar must therefore be reconsidered.

Giving greater attention to linguistic practice and training by encouraging students to memorise the Holy Qur'an and the noble Prophetic Hadith.

Encouraging reading, particularly Arabic literature in both poetry and prose, as well as didactic poems. This is the means of acquiring and consolidating linguistic competence. Ibn Khaldūn (d. 808 AH) expressed this view when he stated:

"...Mastery of the Arabic language is attained only through extensive memorisation of the speech of the Arabs, until the pattern according to which they constructed their expressions becomes firmly imprinted upon the learner's imagination, enabling the learner to compose in the same manner. The learner thereby attains the position of one who grew up among them and became familiar with their expressions and speech, until acquiring an established ability to express intended meanings in accordance with their manner of speaking."²¹

The learner thus becomes like someone who acquired Arabic directly from them.

We believe that these recommendations are not impossible to implement. They merely require sound policy, sincere intentions, concerted efforts by all linguistic and academic bodies and institutions including language academies, the League of Arab States, the High Council of the Arabic Language in Algeria, and universities and coordinated action to advance and develop the Arabic language and promote its use across all academic and scientific fields.

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- ¹⁸ ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd al-Sayyid Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd, *Al-Tanwīr fī Taysīr al-Naḥw* (Enlightenment in the Simplification of Grammar), Al-Azhar Heritage Library, Cairo, Egypt, n.d. ed., p. 3.
- ¹⁹ Ḥabīb Mughniyyah, *Al-Wāfī fī al-Naḥw wa-l-Ṣarf* (The Comprehensive Guide to Grammar and Morphology), Dār Maktabat al-Hilāl, Beirut, Lebanon, 2nd ed., 2004, p. 9.
- ²⁰ Ibn Khaldūn, *Al-Muqaddimah* (The Introduction), p. 458.
- ²¹ Ibn Khaldūn, *Al-Muqaddimah* (The Introduction), p. 482.