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MANUELA E.B. GIOLFO, FEDERICO SALVAGGIO (editors). 2023.
More than Just Labels Relating TAFL to CEFR Levels. Roma: Aracne.
248 pp. ISBN: 979-12-218-1094-3

More than Just Labels Relating TAFL to CEFR Levels is a volume edited by Professors Giolfo and Salvaggio that brings together contributions from distinguished scholars with the aim to find answers and, more important, to raise awareness about the question of whether to relate the teaching of Arabic to European standards.

The need for such a volume and for contributions from specialized scholars in Teaching Arabic as a Foreign Language (TAFL) aligns with the current European trend of harmonizing language teaching with the reference scales of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). Arabic is no exception to this trend. As José Noijons, an expert for the Council of Europe's European Centre for Modern Languages (ECML), states in the foreword of the volume, initiatives in Arabic language pedagogy that aim to achieve a theoretically valid and effective application of CEFR principles in teaching Arabic as a second or foreign language are highly welcomed (Giolfo, Salvaggio 2023:12).

In the volume's introduction, the two editors pose what is arguably the most critical question regarding the suitability of the CEFR framework for Arabic teaching. There appears to be a consensus that the grammar-translation method of teaching Arabic is no longer aligned with contemporary pedagogical trends. However, proposals for addressing the intrinsic incompatibility arising from Arabic's unique linguistic situation diverge significantly. As Giolfo and Salvaggio note, "For some it is TAFL that should be rethought in order to adjust to CEFR standards, whereas for others it should be the other way around: CEFR principles should conform for the peculiarities that distinguish the Arabic language from other commonly taught languages (Giolfo, Salvaggio 2023: 13). The authors propose an even more radical approach, suggesting that Arabic could

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be considered a unique language and warranting its own dedicated framework. This “Arab framework”, they posit, “could be applied also to other languages that claim the ‘same uniqueness’ as Arabic” (Giolfo, Salvaggio 2023: 14). Nevertheless, the two scholars emphasize that regardless of the chosen approach, the most crucial aspect is to make this decision with full awareness of the ideological implication involved and with a readiness to develop teaching strategies that are coherent with the theoretical choice made.

The volume comprises eight articles by prominent scholars in the field, beginning with a contribution co-authored by the editors and Professor Giuliano Lancioni (Roma Tre University) titled “CEFR-based TAFL. Syllabus, Lexicon, Variation”. This article is structured in six parts, with the first dedicated to the history of Arabic teaching in Europe. The second part addresses the challenges in framing Arabic teaching, particularly highlighting “the elephant in the room, the diglossic nature of the Arabic linguistic system” (Giolfo, Salvaggio 2023: 26). The third section, “Towards a CEFR-based Arabic syllabus”, presents considerations regarding the most appropriate Arabic variety for the lower CEFR level, A1, and discusses the categories of Arabic language learners for whom it should apply. The subsequent part emphasizes the importance of a corpus-based and CEFR-oriented grammar for developing comprehensive linguistic competence. In the fifth part, the authors pose a crucial question: “Can variation be taught?” (Giolfo, Salvaggio 2023: 37). This inquiry raises awareness of the reality of contemporary Arabic, which appears to exist in a state of infinite variability due to phenomena such as code-switching, code-mixing and code-shifting. Given the difficulty in teaching this linguistic continuum, the authors suggest in the final part that it might be beneficial to introduce intermediate forms in teaching. These forms would act as a “glue” alongside clearly characterized varieties, potentially enhancing authentic proficiency in Arabic.

Rasha Soliman’s article, titled “Knowledge of Arabic Variation as a CEFR-Based Sociolinguistic Competence Principles to Inform Arabic L2 Teaching”, forms the second contribution to the volume. Soliman posits that Arabic “has two linguistic variation qualities that cannot be ignored; these are diglossia and dialectal variation” (Soliman in Giolfo, Salvaggio 2023: 47). The paper examines the impact of linguistic variation realism on Arabic learners, particularly in the Higher Education (HE) context. To illustrate her points, Soliman presents screenshots of WhatsApp exchanges between students from the University of Leeds, where the teaching focus was predominantly on Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), and Arabic L1 speakers. Her observations reveal that Arabic L1 speakers naturally and progressively incorporate more dialectal elements in their communication, representing just one aspect of the linguistic variation that Arabic L2 learners must navigate. The author then correlates Arabic variation with the CEFR’s value of comprehensiveness, specifically focusing on how the Framework addresses plurilingualism and the achievement of awareness and comprehension of multiple

varieties and registers. In the final section, Soliman outlines fundamental principles of L2 learning that should be considered when integrating variation into L2 teaching. She draws upon the principles presented in *Introducing second language acquisition* by Muriel Saville-Troike and Karen Barto, attempting to apply these to Arabic language pedagogy.

The paper “Entering the House through the Proper Door. The Integrated Approach to Arabic Instruction” is, as anticipated, authored by Munther Younes, the originator of the Integrated Approach. Younes addresses the unique linguistic situation of Arabic, which he characterizes as “abnormal”, and elucidates how the Integrated Approach selects appropriate forms for instruction in Cornell University’s Integrated Program and *‘Arabiyyat al-Naas* text-book series. The author’s objective is to enable students to communicate effectively without sounding overly formal and artificial, nor too informal and thus geographically restricted. Younes examines the selection of appropriate forms from the perspective of phonology, morphology-syntax and lexicon. Throughout the paper, he presents arguments supporting the Integrated Approach as the optimal pedagogical solution for teaching Arabic.

The next paper is written by Annamaria Ventura from University of Bologna and is titled “CEFR for Arabic Based on a Diglossic Switching Model”. Ventura explains the distribution of CEFR’s skills between the Arabic varieties and presents what she terms a “diglossic switching” (DS) model. This model incorporates a preparatory level, which the author designates as A0. The DS model aims to encompass the full spectrum of linguistic variation, including diastratic, diamesic, diaphasic and diatopic varieties, to achieve a balanced representation of sociolinguistic variation. The A0 preparatory level together with a phonetic and phonological switching model, a morphological and syntactic switching model and a semitistic or Semitic studies transcription model constitute the DS “that can be used as the basis for the application of the CEFR to Arabic learning, teaching, and assessment” (Ventura in Giolfo, Salvaggio 2023: 122).

Letizia Lombezzi’s paper, “Standard-ology, Dialectology, and TAFL from Ideology to Concrete Applications”, advocates for a “recognition of reality” and the transcendence of the “Standard-ology vs Dialectology” dichotomy. Lombezzi posits that standard-ology overestimates the utility of Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), while dialectology overemphasizes the reciprocal diversity of Arabic registers by focusing on the identification of micro-varieties (Lombezzi in Giolfo, Salvaggio 2023: 139). The author proposes the implementation of an integrated approach inspired by CEFR and argues against commonly promoted concerns, such as those related to the mixing of Arabic varieties, suggesting that a more holistic view of Arabic language teaching is necessary.

“Pre-A1 Level in Light of the New CEFR Companion Volume and TAFL Theories” is an article written by Andrea Facchin that examines the introduction of a pre-A1 level in the new Companion Volume of the CEFR and its implications

for the field of TAFL. Facchin initially explores the relationship between the CEFR and Arabic, reviewing scholarly interpretations from recent years. Subsequently, he focuses on the pre-A1 level presented in the new CEFR Companion Volume, correlating it with TAFL theories on novice learners to propose an implementation model for Arabic. The author's methodology involves analyzing pre-A1 level descriptors and interpreting them within the context of Arabic's complex sociolinguistic landscape. Consequently, Facchin develops detailed descriptors for the Arabic as a Foreign Language (AFL) literacy acquisition phase, emphasizing the "unique features of its teaching practice, such as goof pronunciation, phonological awareness, letter progression and the use of diacritics" (Facchin in Giolfo, Salvaggio 2023: 172).

Kassem Wahba's paper, "Advanced Levels of Proficiency and the Goals of Arabic Language in Higher Education", focuses on the acquisition of advanced language abilities. It examines the current status of Arabic in higher education and presents a theoretical framework for attaining advanced proficiency in foreign languages, with a particular emphasis on Arabic. Wahba offers a comparative analysis of the goals for advanced Arabic proficiency in Medieval Islam versus contemporary times, where communication is the primary objective. The author illustrates the language skills of an educated native speaker, concluding that their competence is predominantly influenced by the literary variety. However, Wahba notes a recent shift: "in the last few years the reading and writing of the L variety became an active skill and reading and writing in the H variety became a dormant skill under the influence of the various means of social media" (Wahba in Giolfo, Salvaggio 2023: 195). The author analyses the challenges of achieving advanced L2 abilities in Arabic programs and observes that the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) guidelines do not accurately reflect the reality of Arabic. Wahba also considers the diverse missions and goals of Arabic programs acknowledging the challenges this diversity poses for developing a unified curriculum. He notes the existence of programs with more communicative goals and those with broader humanistic educational objectives. In conclusion, Wahba advocates for a synergy between these two categories of programs, suggesting that this integration is necessary for achieving advanced abilities within a humanistic framework.

In the last contribution, "Teaching Arabic in Context Language as a Means to Sample the Culture beyond the Official Curriculum", Feras Alkabani, from University of Sussex, begins by addressing the disparities between teaching European and non-European languages in relation to the CEFR. Alkabani presents an innovative approach to address the multifaceted challenges of teaching Arabic within the CEFR framework. The author's solution involves implementing extracurricular activities that complement linguistic instruction with cinematic and cultural experiences. This approach "enabled the students to bridge the gap between MSA and the regional dialects and thus enabling them to be more flexible in their use of the different registers of the language" (Alkabani

in Giolfo, Salvaggio 2023: 228). To demonstrate the broader applicability of his project, Alkabani includes a sample module in his paper. This module aims to ensure a „more inclusive and more interdisciplinary teaching and learning experience for the students” (Alkabani in Giolfo, Salvaggio 2023: 235).

In conclusion, *More Than Just Labels Relating TAFL to CEFR Levels* edited by Professors Manuela E.B. Giolfo and Federico Salvaggio represents a significant scholarly contribution to the field of Teaching Arabic as a Foreign Language (TAFL). This volume offers a comprehensive array of perspectives on the challenges and opportunities inherent in aligning Arabic instruction with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). The diverse contributions effectively bridge theoretical frameworks with practical applications proposing innovative solutions to persistent challenges in Arabic language pedagogy. As the editors note in their introduction, the volume’s primary objective is not to provide definite answers to fundamental questions concerning TAFL and its correlation with CEFR, but rather to “raise awareness of the ideological and methodological implications that the choice to link (or not to link) TAFL to CEFR inevitably entails” (Giolfo, Salvaggio 2023: 14). The volume succeeds in its purpose, effectively raising awareness of the complex implications involved in relating TAFL to CEFR and providing valuable insights for scholars and practitioners in the field. This work thus stands as a valuable scientific resource for researchers and educators engaged in the ongoing development and refinement of Arabic language instruction.