

For Immediate Release



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Academic Forum at AUB:

“Arabic Language and Communication Skills in the Twenty-First Century: Perspectives and Approaches”

The Arabic and Near Eastern Languages Department and the Department of Education at the American University of Beirut (AUB), in partnership with Qatar Foundation International (QFI) and Qatar Foundation (QF), organized a forum entitled "Arabic Language and Communication Skills in the 21st Century: Perspectives and Approaches. “Participants included a number of lecturers who teach Arabic as a first and second language at university and primary and secondary school levels in a number of Arab and foreign countries.

The forum started with an opening session by AUB professor Mahmoud Al-Batal, followed by Dr. Anies Al-Hroub, Chairperson of the AUB Department of Education, and Maggie Mitchell Salem, Executive Director of Qatar Foundation International.

The forum aimed to review and discuss a number of theoretical and practical matters related to teaching communication skills in the curricula of Arabic language taught as a first and second language, and how to establish communication skills as a basis for curriculum shaping. The Forum devoted particular attention to linking the development of these skills to developing the critical and analytical thinking capacities of pupils through academic writing, which represented one of the key areas of focus in the discussions.

Al-Hroub said, “The Arabic language suffers from psychological problems, which can be briefly summed up as the condescending view of its students, and social problems in which the speakers of foreign and Arab languages are divided into job market-related social and economic classes, and scholastic-pedagogy. And if we focus on the later issue, we find that teaching Arabic, even in Lebanon, is limited to Arabic language, religious education and history, while the scientific materials are taught in foreign languages. Thus, there is discriminatory separation between

foreign languages and Arabic language. Foreign languages help a pupil to complete his studies in science, medicine, engineering and others and reach broader horizons, while Arabic language is limited to poetry, religious studies and mythology.”

He added, “This initiative marks the beginning of a concerted and important effort between AUB’s Departments of Education, and Arabic in cooperation with Qatar Foundation International and Qatar Foundation via studying and addressing the challenges and problems faced by students trying to learn and communicate in Arabic in our schools in the Arab World and Lebanon. Our future project is to develop the means and methods of teaching Arabic in public and private schools in the Arab countries.”

Mitchell Salem said, “What really resonated in the discussion was a focus on the purpose of language: why are students learning it, and what will they do with it? This was the first of what will be an ongoing conversation. Partnering with AUB and QF ensures we engage Arabic teachers in the Middle East and far beyond. We share a concern for advancing how we teach Arabic language, how we accumulate and share that knowledge, and in the development of Arabic language skills in the future.”

There is a gap that separates many students from the Arabic language, and there is a growing sense of alienation towards the language and their future relationship with it professionally and culturally, in addition to their sense of inefficiency and lack of skills in Arabic. This reality results in problems and raises many challenges. However, the forum is based on the belief that these problems are not intrinsic to the language itself and to its difficulties, nor in its ability to keep up with the times, but in the educational curricula and approaches used in many educational establishments in the Arab world. The forum also stems from the premise that the way to change this reality is to re-engineer curricula and approaches to education, and develop new materials for teaching within the frameworks of communication and its components applied in many modern approaches to teaching languages.

The conference spanned two days where discussions were held around a number of key questions, including: What is meant by communication in the context of teaching Arabic and its components and forms? What is the relationship of communication to the needs of learners? What is its place within the perceptions of teachers, curriculum designers and parents? How to approach the concept of communication within the "One Arabic Language" system, which includes the heritage and contemporary philology and dialects? How can communication be an essential part of the process of formulating learning outcomes for Arabic courses in all levels of teaching? How to reconcile these "communicative" approaches with Arabic approaches and mainstream approaches that focus on grammar and rules? How can academic writing be used as a tool to develop learners' analytical and critical thinking? What research and studies are needed as buttress points in the development of communication curricula?

One of the outcomes sought by the organizers through this forum was to create the nucleus of a wide network of stakeholders to be active in developing communication skills in Arab and foreign countries; and to develop conviction that focusing on communication skills can contribute to changing the reality of current Arab curricula and establish a road map for the number of practical steps to be taken in the years to come in order to enhance communication and exchange of experiences among professors; and to publish a study on the conclusions of the forum that allows connecting professors who did not participate in the discussions of issues. This study would be the basis for future work. The organizers also expressed the hope that this forum will be the first in a series of future forums that will establish new visions and approaches to the teaching and learning of Arabic.

Commenting on the forum and the results achieved, Dr. Mahmoud Al-Batal said, “The forum focused on developing communication skills in Arabic language curricula in the 21st century. It also provided an opportunity to meet within an academic gathering of sixty professors from nine different countries working in the teaching of Arabic at different levels: university, secondary and preparatory, and in teaching Arabic as a first and second language. In its presentation sessions and discussions, the forum dealt with issues related to communication and its relation to the needs of learners, and ways to make communication an integral part of the process of formulating the learning outcomes of Arabic courses in all stages of teaching. It also discussed how to reconcile the "communicative" approaches to Arabic curricula and mainstream approaches that focus on grammar; it also dealt with the topic of academic writing and methods of employing it as a tool to develop the abilities of learners to think analytically and critically.”

He concluded, “In our assessment, this forum has contributed to the development of awareness among participants that the focus on communication skills can contribute to changing the reality of the current Arab curricula. It also laid the foundations to establish a network of those concerned with the development of communication skills in Arabic, in the Arab and foreign countries. It is our hope that this forum will be the first in a series of future forums that will establish new visions and approaches to teaching and learning Arabic based on the needs of learners in the 21st century.”

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Note to Editors

About AUB

Founded in 1866, the American University of Beirut bases its educational philosophy, standards, and practices on the American liberal arts model of higher education. A teaching-centered research university, AUB has more than 900 full-time faculty members and a student body of about 9,100 students. AUB currently offers more than 120 programs leading to bachelor's, master's, MD, and PhD degrees. It provides medical education and training to students from throughout the region at its Medical Center that includes a full-service 420-bed hospital.

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