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Methodological Aspects of Development of Linguistic and Regional Studies Courses — Evidence from the Arab Studies Course (Arab Countries)

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Abstract

The paper presents analysis of a new kind of educational courses based on multidisciplinary approach. The course synthesizes the methodologies and advances of regional studies and regional geography, cultural and cross-cultural studies and communication, oriental studies, civilization studies, second language acquisition and second language teaching. The course is a part of a wider language program elaborated and implemented at NRU HSE (Saint Petersburg) and bases essentially on the inclusive strategies of Arab countries study, primarily language learning techniques (Arabic). It requires preliminary commandment of elementary course of Arabic. This study aims to analyze a year's experience of constructing the Arab countries studies course and its teaching process, and to evaluate the merits and demerits of its aspects, taking into account the peculiarities of the academic activity, language skills, basic dictionary, and comparative analysis of several similar courses.

The importance of the formation of linguacultural studies competence of Arabists is linked to several factors. The most important of them is that there appeared certain common traits amongst Arab peoples, the knowledge of which may facilitate mutual understanding between different cultures. Also we must take into account the fact that each Arab country is a unique socio-cultural unit, which bears the imprint of the ethnic specificity and individual features of geography and historical development. Formation of the linguacultural studies competence of Arabists is the way to educate them in the true tolerance, because background in cultural and ethnic spheres plays a crucial role in communication. In order to become interculturally effective one need to understand the concept with all its components.

However, few courses have this culture-based teaching component of Arabic, so the status of Arabic is underestimated or ignored. These issues create a kind of a challenge for the teachers. In view of this background and taking into account positive and negative impacts, we consider the central question that motivates this paper: whether it is worth combining the teaching of these aspects and at the same time increasing the language level, to be precise – Arab countries and Arabic language, to highlight the most important issues with training listening, reading and speaking skills, and to explore the ways to implement this course in the program of the second year students with the beginner level of Arabic language.

Keywords: Arab language, lingual cultural studies, Arab countries, methods of teaching, regional geography, oriental studies.

Intro **Why the Arab world?**

The world has become more complex in recent years. The worldwide movement toward economic, financial, trade and communications integration and globalization is driven by international relations and aided by information technology. This process affects the environment, culture, political systems and economic development in societies around the world. Globalization is not new, though it calls the shots. This is why nowadays more than ever specialists with a vast knowledge in regional studies and languages are in demand.

There is clear evidence that Arab countries play a crucial role in the world and modern geopolitics. In terms of the economy, OPEC countries (7 of the 13 nations are Arab) control about 2/3 of the world's oil reserves. They account for approximately 35% of world production, or half the world's oil export. As we know, the Arab countries jointly control the price and sales volume of crude oil in the world market. This undoubtedly affects the global economy.

The countries of the Middle East and North Africa play a pivotal role in international politics and social life. For instance, if we consider the recent story of the 2010–2011 Arab uprisings, we see generally acknowledged opinion that the uprisings themselves were very much a region-wide phenomenon. However, the initial uprisings then clearly cannot be understood without an appreciation of their regional and international dynamics. The world has become “East oriented”, developed countries are fighting eastern governments or searching for allies among them, as well as some developing ones. The result of this struggle influences the distribution of forces in the region and in the world.

Why Arabic?

In the process of intercultural communication — a prerequisite for adaptation to a different ethnolinguistic environment — one needs to have a wide knowledge of the region under study and the norms of communicative behavior which constitute the concept of speech along with speech etiquette.

Given the sociocultural and ethnic specificity of the Arabic language conditions, one can not underestimate the value related to and associated with Oriental studies subjects — linguacultural studies, ethnolinguistics, sociolinguistics, ethnography, philological training, practical application of skills for everyday communication in Arabic, etc. We need to pay attention to the extralinguistic components, primarily

the willingness of students and their ability to perform active and correct discussions bearing in mind the basic facts of national mentality, to express the reaction in a prepared or spontaneous speech in Arabic. To communicate in the Arabic-speaking environment one must not only have knowledge of the language but also the developed background “as a mutual knowledge of the realities of the speaker and the listener which is the basis of linguistic communication” [Kuhareva 2008: 8] to be understood.

Why the Arab world is better studied in Arabic?

The importance of the formation of linguacultural studies competence of Arabists is linked to several factors. The most important of them is that the Arab world, despite the current tragic political and economic situation, for centuries has been formed in a certain manner and the community is based on a common language (Arabic literature), a single culture (Muslim in most cases) and a single history. This led to the appearance of certain common traits amongst the Arab peoples, the knowledge of which may facilitate mutual understanding between different cultures.

On the other hand, we must take into account the fact that each Arab country is a unique sociocultural unit which bears the imprint of the ethnic specificity and individual features of geography and historical development. In Arab countries, along with common traditions and customs associated mainly with the Arab-Muslim culture, there are national and religious traditions preserved from ancient times and observed by representatives of ethnic and religious groups living in the territory of one or another Arab country.

Knowledge of these characteristics, history, culture, traditions and customs of the peoples of the Arab countries would lead to better integration in the environment. Formation of the linguacultural studies competence of Arabists is the way to educate them in the true tolerance under which the modern scientific community understands the recognition of the diversity of cultures and their equality. This is why it is hereby suggested that a language course should be based on culture/tradition/economy/politics approach.

Cultural and ethnic backgrounds play a crucial role in communication processes. Cultural intelligence is an important step towards cultural competence. Acquiring practical intercultural skills is the hardest part of cross-cultural

learning. Being familiar with cross-cultural communication does not just imply having a vague or rudimentary idea of what this or that expression means and how it works. In order to become interculturally effective one needs to understand the concept with all its components. Moreover, he/she should be able to translate the theory into an action. We could put it this way: Intercultural competence is about what you know and what you feel. Awareness – knowledge – skills are therefore three basic training steps [Kincaid 1988: 289; Morgan, Byram 1994: 5; Scollon & Scollon 2001; Wiseman 2003].

However, few courses have this culture-based teaching component of Arabic, so the status of Arabic is underestimated or ignored. Among subjects in the humanities, Oriental studies are unique in introducing students to civilizations that are completely different from the Western ones more familiar for them. A degree in Oriental studies is not a vocational degree. However, a wide range of employers appreciate the skills the graduates gain. Career options are available in finance, the media, commerce, law, interpreting and translating, the arts, etc. These issues create a kind of a challenge for the teachers and the question arises: are there ways to provide students with the necessary basic knowledge in all these fields and alongside this to develop their skills in the language they have just started to learn, especially in a limited time-frame?

Few courses nowadays focus on the tasks. In many universities of Russia and other countries we see special courses qualifying students in separate areas of knowledge. In view of this background and taking into account positive and negative impacts, we consider the central question that motivates this paper: whether it is worth combining the teaching of these aspects and at the same time increasing the language level (to be precise – the Arab countries and Arabic language) to highlight the most important issues with training listening, reading and speaking skills and to explore the ways to implement this course in the program of the second-year students with the beginner level of Arabic.

The paper analyses the concept of the new Arab countries studying course (ACSC) newly launched this academic year by the Department of Asian and African studies at the National Research University the HSE — St. Petersburg as part to the Basic Arabic language studies program for second-year students. How

to generate a special course to cover a wide range of historical, geographical, socio-economic and cultural issues? What way will be most effective? What is deserves special attention? Given hereby are the arguments that such kind of course would solve the number of listed problems and it is useful. The paper provides a review of pedagogical approaches to teaching Arabic (weaknesses and strengths) as well as an analysis of empirical approaches aimed to evaluate the course and create its theoretical framework.

Literature Review

In this paper a new kind of educational courses based on a multidisciplinary approach was analyzed. The course synthesizes the methodologies and advances of regional studies and regional geography, cultural and cross-cultural studies and communication, Oriental studies, civilization studies, second language acquisition and second language teaching. This approach makes us examine several spheres of knowledge and identify an appropriate context for bringing the research.

First of all we need to understand what the linguistic features of Arabic are by making a review of basic textbooks like the one written by the professor of Saint Petersburg State University Frolova O.B. [Frolova 2001] or the lexicographical work by Wehr H. [Wehr 1979]. Also there are Arabic textbooks for the learners of different levels that give us material on a wide range of issues [سوردي مي حرلا دبع 1418 هـ خيشلا دمحم 2008].

Works on diglossia and grammar may help build the background of the course [Al-Batal 1992; Kouloughli 1979]. There are many related articles, the one that was very useful for the research is “Proficiency in Arabic language learning: Some reflections on basic goals” by Peter Heath [Heath 1990].

Teaching of a language is hardly possible without knowledge of vocabulary, teaching and learning processes, corresponding methods. Theories of learning, whether explicit or tacit, are informed by study or intuition, well-considered or not, and play a role in the choices instructors make concerning their teaching. What method of teaching should we choose? How to avoid the inclination of students to rote learn rather than develop any real understanding of the content? To identify the general topics and to make conclusions for providing a context of the paper an analysis of a number of handbooks related to the topic was made. “Teaching and Learning Language and Cul-

ture” by Morgan Carol [Morgan, Byram 1994] helped us understand and compare the ways of teaching culture through the language. In addition, new teaching approaches are brightly shown in the book by Nielsen H.L. [Nielsen 1996] Moreover, a detailed section on the ways of teaching for Arabic language professionals expands the horizons of teaching in 21st century [Wahba, Taha 2006].

To identify the borders of the study materials and to get a view on the subject itself it seemed reasonable to compare similar courses, try to find courses close to the ACSC in its purposes, region of study, ways of interpreting the material (through the language). So we made an attempt and searched for the publicly available courses [Bocharova; Stremovskaya; Zaharova; Vlasova 2010; Komova, Mikoian, Anisimova, Baranova, Levashev 2004]. Unfortunately, the courses we found are greatly different so we had no opportunities to create common criteria for the comparison.

There is the challenge of combining or synthesizing the language learning process with other spheres of knowledge that makes a complex idea of the Arab world. So it is reasonable to examine the works on linguistic and cultural studies [.. زرع] and also the samples of such kind of courses. Theories on the intercultural communication are of great importance as well [Kincaid 1988: 289; Scollon & Scollon 2001; Wiseman 2003]. The work by Kovirshina N. B. that was taken as a starting point for our ACSC [Kovirshina 1999].

While constructing the course there were used a lot of books and manuals on the geography [Kulikov 2011], history [Vasilyev 2003; Zaharova 2011; Irmijaeva 2001; Shumov, Andreev 2002], economics [Ali-Zade 2010; Ali-Zade 2011; Kulikov, Melikova 2010], philosophy [The history of philosophy 1996] and literature [Arab literature... 1975; Arab literature... 1970; Literature of the Arab countries 1977; Literature of North Africa 1987; Encyclopedic dictionary of literature 1990] of the region of the Middle East and North Africa. Encyclopedias and atlases have also been used [Atlas of the world's wonders... 2007; Africa... 1986; Big illustrated encyclopedia... 2004; The whole world... 2001; Vnukov 2000; The geographic handbook... 2005; Basic facts... 2005; Ryzhov 2004; Countries and nations... 1982; Countries of the world... 2004; Encyclopedia... 2001a; Encyclopedia... 2001b].

Islam plays a crucial role in all the spheres of life in the region of the Middle East and

North Arica from the early Middle Ages; it is hardly possible to understand the great amount of social patterns, clichés, and linguistic features without knowledge of the topic [Islam as a religion... 1994: 311–343; Islam... 1991; The Quran... 1990; The Quran... 2003; Rukaiya 2002; Rodionov 2003]. Also Islam has been affected by contemporary political movements, national policies, economic needs and cultural patterns. That makes the problem even more complex.

The distinguishing and unique feature of our ACSC is that it aims to expand social competence in the use of the studied language with respect to various aspects; to form students' skills of pragmatic thinking on the material of a foreign language (Arabic). Students need to master complex knowledge about the countries of the target language to adequately understand and interpret different types of texts [Dzhamil 2006; Vlasova 2010; Ibragimov 2007; Ibragimov 2007; Ibragimov 2007; Semenova 1979]. So in addition to the textbooks we referred to electronic resources of texts, newspapers [خال او نامزلا، قريزجل، مارهالا، قباوبل], video portals, social nets, governmental official sites to have an opportunity to train the language on the modern materials, get online information and be kept up-to-date of the latest news.

Linguistic features of Arabic

Arabic is an Afro-Asiatic Semitic language closely related to Maltese, Aramaic or Hebrew. The linguistic situation in the Arab world is conventionally characterized by diglossia which refers to the existence of two forms of language: the formal and the vernacular ones. In the universities we usually study Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) — the contemporary offspring of the classical language that is used across the Arab world but is generally confined to writing and formal contexts: literature, newspapers, education, radio/television news programs, political speeches, and so forth. However, students also have to learn a regional vernacular Arabic used in everyday informal transactions. Both varieties are widely used and differences between them are brightly exhibited in syntax, morphology, phonetics, and semantics.

Anyone learning MSA will likely want to actually hold conversations while abroad. Communicating with locals means leaving classical MSA behind and entering the diverse world of spoken Arabic dialects. This is the heart of diglossia – when a language has different written and spoken varieties. One can have problems

with involvement into cultural communication without knowing specificities of a number of dialects.

Due to such linguistic situation in Arab countries, a teacher and a student have to face the fact that in addition to the language there are more things to be learned, at least surely more than is usually attempted to within a single language course. Moreover, Arabic has no principal or dominant dialect; there is a wide variety of vernaculars from Iraqi and Syrian to Egyptian and Moroccan. In addition, there are intermediate forms of the language while native speakers tend to mix elements of Standard Arabic and different dialects in a rather variable way. Therefore, it would be better for a student to get some basic structures of some of these dialects and have an opportunity to listen to them as much as possible in the lessons with corresponding comments of the teacher. This was set as a goal. Although, our course is not a course of basic grammar or a dialect, or geography, or politics precisely, it is supposed to support the learning of regional characteristics on the basis of MSA grammar with giving the learners the slight idea of numerous Arabic dialects, and to make a rough picture of the Arab world through and with the use of the language.

There exist several approaches to teaching Arabic. Each of them has its own merits and demerits. First of all, the most widely used and the oldest approach is the Classical one. Instructions are based mainly on morphological and syntactic analyses of texts, the method of grammar and translation is applied with very limited attention paid to the oral component. This way is beneficial for the first steps of learning the language and providing the “basement”. However, following this method through the whole period of studying leads to acquisition of a limited number of skills. In this case, due to the effects of the new developments in foreign language education in the late 20th century the oral component of MSA courses began to receive increasing attention.

The second approach that should be paid attention to is the Colloquial one based on the teaching of a specific Arabic dialect or a specific regional dialectal group (Gulf, North African for instance) for oral communication. This approach is used mainly in commercial courses, or individual lessons, it requires no knowledge of MSA or even of Arabic script [Heath 1990: 31–48] since in the vast majority of colloquial textbooks transliteration is used. This approach is very helpful as an additional experience.

In recent years, for training of specialists specializing in Arabic there has been used the Middle language or the so called Simultaneous approach that seems to provide an adequate answer to the question of how to deal with the Arabic diglossia. This type of teaching Arabic is based on the methods of learning of varieties between MSA and the dialects [Al-Batal 1992: 284–304]. Programs based on this approach usually divide the linguistic skills across the varieties: reading and writing are taught in MSA while speaking and listening skills – in a certain dialect or with some parts of the dialect. This aims to mirror the linguistic situation in the Arab world and emphasize the communicative importance of being able to switch on the speech continuum if we speak about the role of the communication aspect in teaching languages [Holes 1990: 36–41; Kouloughli 1979: 125–34; Nielsen 1996].

Due to the target audience of the second-year students it was decided to make MSA the priority within the course, so the majority of texts, audio materials are in Standard Arabic but we involve some dialect phrases and words from each country under the study. This gives an opportunity to pick up some cultural clichés, train listening skills and to prepare students for their further practice of the dialect course in the third year.

To achieve this goal while preparing materials for the lessons we try to choose audio and video files with implementation of parts of spoken dialects, for instance, interviews, reports, some TV shows or parts of movies. This sampling enables to introduce students to practice of oral language consistently so that step by step they understand the differences and learn the basic vocabulary.

Vocabulary and teaching differences

The other issue that is usually discussed if we speak about teaching Arabic or other foreign language is the teaching. The other issue that usually discussed when it comes to teaching Arabic or other foreign language is the teaching of vocabulary. Arabic vocabulary learning is of particular importance. Unfortunately, this importance is currently not properly reflected in textbooks.

Vocabulary is a fundamental component of language proficiency that provides the basis of learners' ability to speak, listen, read and write. The teaching of it should be incorporated in all stages of the second language learning. At lower levels, the use of paired lists of new words can help students to focus on the vocabulary as

an addition to class activities work on contextualizing the new items. The introduction of each portion of vocabulary can start through reading a text, listening to audio and video clips. This is a common practice.

However, in Arabic “guessing” seems to be the most important of the strategies that enhance learning vocabulary in the face of the huge body of word items that learners of Arabic have to deal with. This strategy is prompted by the morphological system of Arabic, syntactic forms and lexical couplets.

There are two approaches to vocabulary learning: incidental learning and explicit instruction. First of all, through reading practice students absorb and retain vocabulary. However, the explicit instruction approach criticizes the first one for allowing only receptive comprehension of a new word and not being able to develop its active usage which can best be achieved through explicit instruction that uses fully or partially contextualized examples. As a result, vocabulary in Arabic curriculum must be taught both directly and indirectly [Wahba & Taha 2006: 331–341]. An attempt was made to translate these approaches into the course.

Teaching of Arabic

Teaching of Arabic as a second language has made great strides in the last several decades. In the area of evaluated curricula, in the 1960–1970s of the 20th century there appeared two books that were issued for the benefit of foreign learners of Arabic. They structured the teaching system of the language and gave the profession of Arabic teaching a sense of purpose and unity: *Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic* by Hans Wehr [Wehr 1979: v] and textbooks *Elementary Modern Standard Arabic* and *Intermediate Modern Standard Arabic* by Peter Abboud (et al.). In Russia one of such textbooks was *We speak Arabic: a manual for the I and II courses* by Frolova O.B. [Frolova 2001] But the language is changing quickly.

In recent years, however, these textbooks tend to be replaced by less structured and less focused texts. The main reason for this tendency seems to be connected with the misapplication of teaching materials of authentic origin only. Under the guise of authenticity, pieces from different sources, mostly from printed or non-printed media, are placed together in single volumes without any regard for their divergent structural levels.

Otherwise, grammar, for historical reasons, plays a greater role in teaching of Arabic than in modern European languages. It is much more

structured and complex in some basic aspects. However, the instruction in this area suffers a few drawbacks: relying on the grammatical description of Classical Arabic for teaching of MSA structure – due to the old Arab grammarians. As compared to any European language, there is hardly a book that teaches a modern European language through its medieval version. Secondly, there still remains the adaptation of grammatical categories and terminology of European languages to the teaching of Arabic, in spite of the well-known linguistic axiom that no language should be described in terms of the structure of another one. Only when there will be carried out a comprehensive statistical gathering of all grammatical features of MSA alongside with a description of its structure in its own terms – only then the true MSA can be taught.

In the early 21st century there appeared an unexpected problem; the challenge for all teachers of Arabic outside the Arab world nowadays is to find a way to rekindle interest in learning Arabic against the current negative propaganda. As soon as political situation in the Middle East requires us to follow the stream of quickly changing events, materials used for training the students tend to be largely drawn from the narrowly defined political type. Such narrowly focused language materials, however, can never make a basis for the deep internalizing of the culture and no serious learning of the language can be achieved.

As a result, we made an attempt to avoid sticking on politics in Arab countries studies course by choosing different topics for each 2 months' period, paying attention to different country every lesson. The first module is devoted to the history of the period of Jahiliyyah (the time before Islam), Succession to Muhammad, the Islamic Conquests, Rashidun Caliphs, Umayyad dynasty, Abbasid Caliphs at Baghdad and Caliphate of Córdoba, Arabic script and general information about geography of the Middle East and North Africa (9 lessons). Within the lessons of the second module students study the countries of the Arabian Peninsula – Oman, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar, Bahrain, Iraq and, additionally, the topics on natural resources, political situation, economy and mass media. The third module is devoted to Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Israel, Egypt and Somali, Djibouti, with special attention paid to the issues of national conflicts, military forces and armory, fleet, cuisine. And at last, during the fourth module we study Sudan, Libya, Tu-

nis, Algeria, Morocco, West Sahara, Mauritania, Comoros, with the topics on crafts, music, theater, climate. In addition, for each country at every lesson there is a summary in Arabic containing the basic information about it and links to different sites that may help students deepen their knowledge.

Teaching and learning. Work in the classroom

Teaching and learning are two sides of the same coin. Learning is the interaction between what students know, the new information they find and the activities they engage in as they learn. To connect a student with the mentor's content it is reasonable to use cooperative learning, interactive lectures and engaging active learning strategies, what was successfully combined in our lessons.

What is more, the prior knowledge of a student is crucial if we are trying to predict the result of the studying process. Students do not come to the class as a blank slate. They have some information on the subject and use it to interpret the new one. Sometimes students cannot relate new material to what they already know. That is clear if we speak about the learning of new language. In the majority of cases there is simply a need to memorize or learn for the test. But at the same time the teacher must feel the border when his/her student develops any real understanding of the content.

Taking into account the previous issue we come to the conclusion that the teacher needs to learn about students' experiences, preconceptions, or misconceptions by using pre-tests, and written or oral activities designed to reveal students' thinking about the topic.

As the ACSC is the program for the second course, we suggest that the teacher already knows his/her students' experience and background, mainly after passing the basic courses of geography, Oriental studies and Modern Standard Arabic for the first step. So it is possible to make proper changes in the curriculum.

The course has undergone significant changes since the beginning of the academic year. We faced the problem that quite often there was a lack of time to check homework, to hold a test or a quiz, practice new vocabulary, or discuss some issues related to the lesson. Each and every time this problem was solved differently; it was either online checking of homework by a teacher, online tests, or transfer of a review and analysis of audio or video files as an individual work at home, postponement of a lesson program to delve into the study of materials still complex for students.

It is worth noting that we have successfully coped with the task in spite of the cancellation of several lectures due to the national holidays and the complexity of the pilot year of the course. We managed to cover the whole program materials planned and it had been learned by students sufficiently that the final test results show.

Constructing the program

The next step of making the course was to organize the information. As we have already told, Oriental studies are rather complex. It is syncretic science that includes different spheres. For students to remember and use their knowledge we need to make a conceptual framework. First of all, students need to learn facts, understand this information and get the ideas, and try to make a feedback in the form of discussion or a composition to develop competence in a new topic.

To make the structure of the knowledge clear in ACSC it is worth using maps, comparison tables, illustration and photo materials, video and audio clips. People have different types of memory, so by equal combination of various types of presentation we may get better results.

Cooperation is extremely important in talking on understanding the new information. The peer-to-peer system works not for computers. In this case group projects, discussions in the class, sharing ideas through conversation put newly got knowledge to a test. As a result, there are more ways to clarify, examine and rethink ideas. This style of learning helps develop communication skills and use the information in time because it appears to be difficult for students.

After graduation our students may find themselves in any part of the world, performing any profession. It is good because the perspectives they have are limited only by their own ambitions. However, it has some disadvantages. First of all, we cannot prepare them for everything and equip with all they might need. Secondly, it is often difficult for students to use what they learn in class in new contexts, for example, in a workplace or common life. As a light solution of this problem we tried to use many sorts of simulations and cases, to create and construct various environments of life situations they may face in the real world. We need to help students develop these skills. This strategy is profitable for the purposes of language and culture learning.

To sum up, we see that to create a proper learning process we should follow several

steps. Well-structured organization of lessons, abundance of illustrations and video, audio, reading materials, discussions, simulation games would help to develop required skills and construct a proper background for their proper usage.

Support with the former experience

During our work on ACSC we conducted an analysis of articles studying regional geography through language and culture-oriented linguistics, programs of closely-related courses in other universities available in open access. We drew on the expertise and experience of these courses mainly of Moscow universities, considering the methodology of this kind of courses. We also conducted research of the foreign university courses but were not able to find a detailed program to make a comparison. Moreover, the obstacle is that the course is unique so only programs that resemble its parts could be used to make a comparison and draw conclusions. Due to this fact, unfortunately, the formulation of common criteria proved impossible. Therefore, we try to describe the positive and negative features of these courses versus the goal we intended to achieve by creating ACSC.

However, we may assert with confidence that the existence of regional geography courses in the main Russian and foreign universities shows that courses of the kind are successful, fulfill expectations, and give good results. After searching extensively through the materials available for online access we found that in Russia there is no course like this for Arab countries. So our program is filling this gap.

The analyzed courses

1) The course of Physical and economic geography of the Arab countries [Bocharova]

The course of Physical and economic geography of the Arab countries was chosen because it seems to be the closest one to ours in terms of the information given, however, there are still many differences. As we may clearly see after reading the program the study is intended to provide future professionals with the knowledge in the field of science expanding their understanding of the individual countries and the region as a whole, to give them a chance learn not only the peculiarities of the geography of a particular area, its most important economic objects and their placement but also to see the mutual relationship between economic-resource and demographic base of

the studied countries, on the one hand, and human life, on the other.

The language of studying is Russian which of course limits the knowledge. When it comes to foreign countries, mainly Eastern ones, many concepts, traditions, rules are incomprehensible for us as for people of other culture, as well as it is hard to explain the behavior or style of living of the members of other civilizations. Sometimes it happens so that in our native language there is no word to express the statement or a term. This leads to the conclusion that learning of the regional geography in the language of the country is more profitable.

At the end of the course a student has to be able to analyze significant social problems and processes, to practice the methods of the humanities, social, economic, historical and philological sciences in various kinds of professional and social activities related to the Eastern studies. In our course we adopted these ideas together with the necessity to teach students to present and analyze information in Arabic.

The complexity of the course under study equals to 72 academic class units and includes ten thematic sections:

- Section 1. "Understanding the region"
- Section 2. "Natural conditions"
- Section 3. "Population and demographic challenges"
- Section 4. "Political system and administrative division"
- Section 5. "General characteristics of the economy"
- Section 6. "Agricultural sector"
- Section 7. "Industry"
- Section 8. "Transport and Communication"
- Section 9. "Foreign trade"
- Section 10. "Economic-geographical areas"

This division makes us face an interesting problem of how to organize the information, or the order of lessons. The matter is that in contradistinction to Great Britain or France we have not one but at least 23 countries to study in 36 hours. Is it better to put separate topics and observe the situation in all the countries of the studied region as Bocharova L.S did? Or analyze in each lesson some different country, paying more attention to "the biggest ones" by dedicating those 2 lessons instead of the usual one?

There was made a compromise decision. It seemed us more reasonable to choose a les-

son-country organization with a combination of topics. What does it mean? As it has been described earlier, we choose a topic for investigation, for example, traditional cuisine, and there are several countries that would be studied within this topic – Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco. So when we talk about Oman, Yemen and Saudi Arabia there would be, for instance, crafts.

Of course, this approach has both merits and demerits. Let us begin with the positive points. First of all, this option helps us organize the information in a clear way because it is nearly impossible to cover everything during one lesson if we have 23 countries in the schedule. Secondly, we may focus on the brightest and more characteristic features of the countries to draw a better pattern and provide students with good basic vocabulary.

However, we may lose some important information without paying attention to each country in the same context. There is a way to avoid it. As a decision for this question, for each country there was made a “card” with the information summary – brief history, administrative and nature maps, photos of the leader, flag, links to the main governmental sites as well as to several universities, links to the newspapers and information sites (everything in Arabic). So this helps students get basic information and master MSA and at the same time saves time to acquaint themselves with the other data and practice it.

2) 2) The course “Negotiation Theory and Practice” (in English) [Stremovskaya].

The course “Negotiation Theory and Practice” by Stremovskaya A.L. has been chosen for several reasons. This course is studied in English which is a foreign language as well as Arabic. What is more, Oriental studies are mainly focused on the sphere of international relations and multicultural communication. The course is dedicated to deepen and expand the theoretical background of students, improve their skills as potential participants in future domestic or international negotiations, train the bilateral and multilateral talks.

The most useful aspects we may take from this course are - students’ acquaintance with the theoretical and applied aspects of the negotiation process in different social spheres, the most common strategies and tactics of negotiation, its personal and national styles. As a result of studying the course students should absorb the spectrum of common cultural and professional competences.

3) The course “Comparative cultural linguistics and geography of Great Britain, USA and Russia for 3d – 5th year students” [Komova, Mikojan, Anisimova, Baranova, Levashov].

The course “Comparative cultural linguistics and geography of Great Britain, USA and Russia” is presented by the authors as a 2-year course (242 hours) with defense of a thesis and designed for students of different departments of the philological faculty. As we may see this course is twice as long as ours and implies obtaining specialization, whereas we set no such goal. The course is divided into themes, each by a different teacher. The themes are as follows.

- Introduction to the comparative cultural studies
- History and culture of the country under study
- Political geography of the US and UK
- Cultural studies and geography of the United States
- Russian geography: from the history of artistic culture
- Economic and physical geography of the UK and US

The themes are developed by different specialists and at first sight are independent by nature. The most interesting and useful part of the course for us is the geography of Great Britain as its aims are similar to the goals we aspire. Practical goal of this course is to familiarize students with the history of the UK, its geography, governmental structure, history, culture and art as well as the history of its relations with some other countries including Russia. Great attention is paid to various traditions and customs of the country, its modern life, especially the present social system, modern culture, the structure of British education, the media, etc. The most important strategic goal of the course is to develop students’ deep and versatile background knowledge of the country, the ability to interpret its national realities correctly, including those that belong to the sphere of non-equivalent vocabulary.

The course includes materials on behavior standards, rules of business correspondence, focusing on vocabulary. However, the main form of presentation of teaching material is a lecture, followed by illustrative audio and video materials, slides, reproductions, maps, etc. Only some specific topics at the discretion of the teacher are set for seminars supposing an independent preparation of students. Discus-

sion and analysis of specific texts, vocabulary and other materials are held in several practice sessions. The course is very interesting and useful; however, it does not set an aim of learning these issues through the language. But many ideas for creating ACSC were taken from this course, as you may notice.

3) The course of Regional geography of the Arab countries [Zakharova].

Course of the Regional geography of the Arab countries was chosen because of the similarity of thematic disciplines. The purpose of this discipline is to enhance the sociocultural competence in the use of the studied material (foreign language) with respect to the variety of its aspects, the formation of students' skills and realistic thinking on the material of the foreign Arabic as well as French acquisition on the basis of printed materials. Students should familiarize themselves with the main stages of historical development, ethnic, national and cultural characteristics of the Arab countries.

Course is divided into three sections:

- Geography and history of the Arab countries
- Population, political system, economy and culture of the Arab countries
- The Arab world

The material of the course is complex and the author provides students with a wide range of information on the topics and issues related to the Arab world. However, unfortunately I could not find any references to the used materials in Arabic whereas a lot is said there about language training.

4) The course of Linguistic and cultural studies. Arab countries [Vlasova 2010].

The course is based on textbooks, encyclopedias, reference books on the history, geography, regional geography and literature of the Arab countries and covers a wide range of historical, geographical, socioeconomic and cultural issues. The course consists of 29 lectures introducing the peculiarities of historical development, socio-political and economic systems in the Arab world. The author claims that her goal is to help students study the Arabic language, Arab culture and Arab society to get an idea of the Arab nation, its prominent public figures. The author begins with the point that knowledge of linguistic and cultural studies of Arab countries is not an end in itself. She hopes that it still will help readers develop a specific life philosophy and solve personal, professional and social problems faster.

The list of topics:

- Introduction (geography, countries and their capitals, political leaders)
- Arab writers (Arabic literature in the Middle Ages and in modern times)
- Islam
- Qur'an
- Arab holidays (rites and customs of the Arabs, Arab cuisine)
- Arab scientists
- Arab countries. Geography. The struggle of the Arab world for independence. Social and economic problems.
- The United Nations and other non-governmental organizations (League of Arab States, Organization of Islamic Cooperation and Organization of Petroleum-Exporting Countries, Arab Maghreb Union, African Union, DN et al.)
- International and regional problems of the modern Arab world.

This course and the manual is a perfect source of information about the Arab world. It may be used as a supporting source to provide students with general information of many spheres related to the Arab world. What is more, due to references presented in the book it is possible to turn to the sources.

Results

Among subjects in the humanities, Oriental studies are unique in introducing students to civilizations that are completely different from the Western ones. In the majority of cases the courses presented in the basic curriculum of universities include language, literature, history, and culture, a wide range of options from art to archaeology, and from philosophy to modern social studies. Taken as a whole, such courses give students a more or less aggregate picture of the studied region. But one should not avoid what the British novelist and travel writer Rebecca West once described in the following manner: "Intercultural relationships are preordained to be clumsy gestures based on imperfect knowledge" [West 1928] Unlike the cases of other courses, the goal of ours is to get a syncretic program and to beat back the challenge of the fast changing world.

Knowledge in the field of economics, geography, sociopolitical systems, history, material and intellectual culture of the Arabic native speakers will allow students to be tolerant, achieve success in the communication process; will assist in adaptation to the conditions in the country of the language under study. The Arabic language and Arab culture will ensure

the development of intellectual and creative abilities of students, develop their thinking, memory and imagination, and form skills of independent cognitive and professional activity, self-education and self-realization.

On studying the course a student is to be knowledgeable about:

- Arab-speaking countries and the peculiarities of the Arabic language there
- State political structure of the Arab countries
- The climatic and geographical features of the Arab countries
- Socio-economic characteristics of the modern Arab society
- The ethnic composition of the population of the Arabian Peninsula and North Africa, and the life of people in the countries
- Specific features of the regions, especially some ethnic and dialectal Arabic in these regions.

A student should have the ability to establish adequate social and professional contacts, use the basic means of language in accordance with the ethical and moral norms of behavior and be able to overcome the impact of national stereotypes. Student needs to learn the ways to compensate his/her knowledge of the studied language, searching for the proper information sources: dictionaries, reference books, teaching materials.

Classroom training should combine educational, practical and methodical features. An introductory lecture is designed to create a general impression of the discipline. During the classes we have to show the role and place of the course in the relevant field of knowledge to determine the value of the discipline in the formation of general and professional competences.

Activities may include various types of work. Part of each class during the school year is devoted to mastering the studying knowledge. Active learning methods should be used in the classroom: discussions, role-playing and simulation games. Structuring and analysis of the materials for the academic discipline are crucial: students are involved in the preparation of abstracts, transcription of audio and video files, analyzing stories on relevant topics, filling in contour maps, preparation of reports and presentations, development of a glossary of key terms and concepts, facts, personalities, dates. Independent work of students is the most important component of professional training, also due to the limited hours of classroom work. It includes training, practicing the vo-

cabulary; work with prepared learning materials, and independent analysis of the texts, and preparation for tests.

To consolidate the theoretical knowledge and develop skills of correct reading and dialogical speech, listening, interpreting, as well as to demonstrate the interactive tutorials and testing of students in the learning process we need to use language laboratory equipment, personal computers and a multimedia screen projection unit. For successful implementation of the program language labs equipped with furniture to the entire size of the group, as well as audio and video, and a utility room with cupboards for storage of training literature and teaching materials are required.

The practice of teaching also shows that regular homework fulfilled according to schedule, strict adherence to the recommendations of the teacher in order to prepare for the next lesson and, in general, a conscious approach to the student's independent work largely determine the level of language proficiency.

Checking of the basic theoretical knowledge of students within the module materials is carried out on the basis of tests and examinations. Also one of the methods of control and consolidation of the material is creative work. It is an independent educational, scientific, practical work the purpose of which is the opportunity to demonstrate their skills and abilities. Creative activities can include performance or songs, creation of video reports, simulation of television shows. As part of this work the teacher estimates presentation of the work, compliance with rules of grammar and spelling, correctness and the culture of speech, use of modern methods of data processing, possession of basic methods and means of receiving, storing and processing of information. To control the current progress and intermediate certification and rating information-measuring system of assessment is used. At the end of the academic year there is a test which includes questions on selected topics of all the four modules.

The course aims to prepare students to work in the conditions of deepening of business contacts in the background of globalization, socioeconomic and political processes. Upon completion of the course, students should get the skills of complex regional studies research and basic knowledge of the geographical identity of the region, especially its nature, historically inherited spatial structure of the population, economy, culture and society and their current transformation.

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МЕТОДОЛОГИЧЕСКИЕ АСПЕКТЫ РАЗВИТИЯ ЛИНГВОСТРАНОВЕДЧЕСКИХ КУРСОВ (на примере курса «Страноведение. Арабские страны»)

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Аннотация. В статье представлен анализ нового вида учебного курса, который синтезирует методики и достижения региональных исследований и региональной географии, культурных и кросс-культурных исследований и коммуникаций, востоковедения, исследований цивилизации, изучения и преподавания языка. Курс является частью широкой программы изучения арабского языка, разработанной и введенной в НИУ ВШЭ (г. Санкт-Петербург). Спецкурс требует предварительного прохождения базового курса арабского языка. Данное исследование направлено на анализ результатов года изучения данного курса. Мы также ставим целью оценить достоинства и недостатки аспектов курса, принимая во внимание особенности учебной деятельности, знание языка, базовый словарь и сравнительный анализ нескольких подобных курсов.

Ключевые слова: арабский язык, лингвострановедение, арабские страны, методика преподавания, региональная география, востоковедение.